"The Lobo of Saguero Bend"
HASHKNIFE in action by **W. C. TUTTLE**

Short Stories

April 10th — Twice A Month

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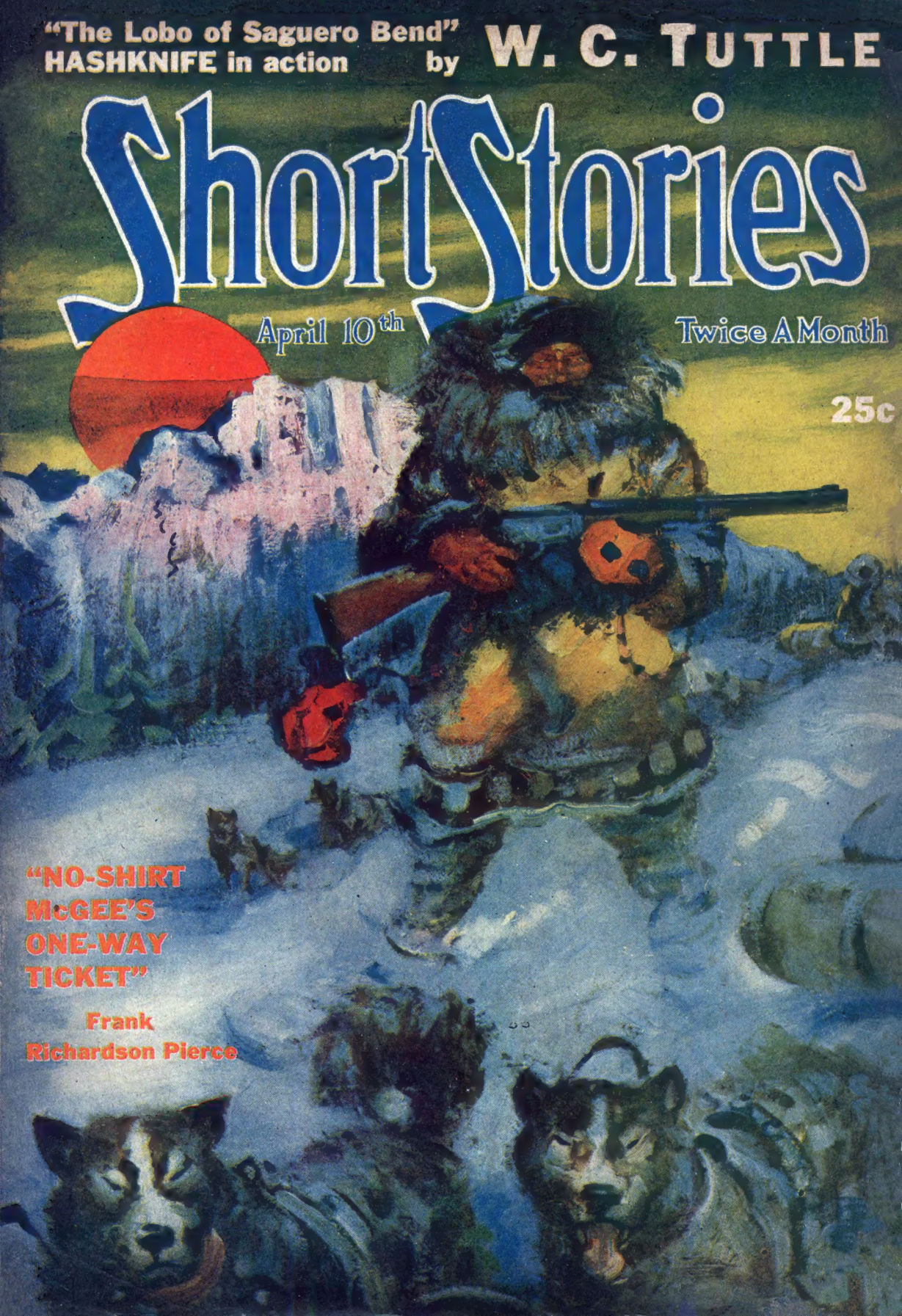

"NO-SHIRT McGEE'S ONE-WAY TICKET"

Frank Richardson Pierce

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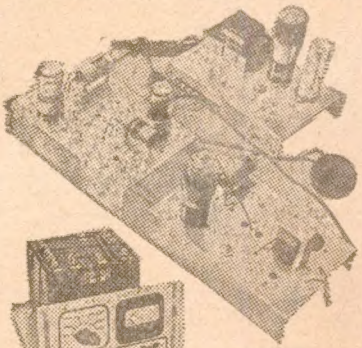

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries, $6.60. Price payable in advance. April 10, 1945. Vol. CXCI, No. 1. Whole Number 943.

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.*
M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.*
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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

APRIL 10th, 1945

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COVER—Benton Clark

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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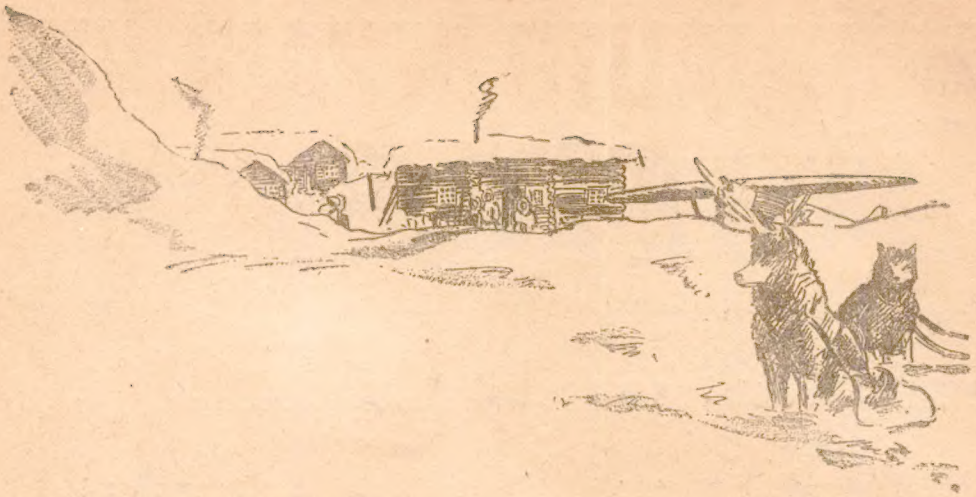

The Story Tellers' Circle

8,000 Miles for No-Shirt McGee?

"OUT of a clear sky came the swellest break I've had in twenty-five years of writing," Frank Richardson Pierce wrote us not so long ago. How about letting the customers in on your 8,000 miles of adventures, Mr. Pierce? And what was this break?

"It seems that the CAA had arranged for a writer to fly over Alaska to see what they'd done, and what was going on up there. He got a strep throat and I was wired would I go? Flying this time of the year can be rugged—winter comes in September around the Circle—so I had a physical check. The FBI checked on me. I was okay. Also I bunked one night with a U. S. marshal while up there, so I'm sure I'm okay. I managed to see a lot of Alaska, including coming down through 11,000 feet of "soup" over Anchorage with ice flying from the props and rattling over the plane; also dropping magazines on Middleton Island 165 miles out in the Gulf. At all times in a land plane, and over water and ice a lot. Got out to St. Lawrence Island—within sight of Siberia—and spent a night in the Eskimo village.

"But I ran into that rare thing—a story that has never been done. Did you ever hear of an Eskimo logger? I never did, but the CAA needed timber for station, and Eskimos went 300 air miles up a river and did some logging. Probably floated the logs 500 miles. And I said, *'That* is a No-Shirt McGee story!' "

Frank Richardson Pierce

"High-grading" Ore

GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL, whose novelette "The Big Clean Up" appears in this issue of SHORT STORIES, tells about a neat way to pick up a little extra money—say about $130,000 a day! Of course you'd have to be a miner in an ore mine around the beginning of this century—but we'll let George Shaftel tell about it.

"High-grading—the stealing of chunks of

(*Continued on page 6*)

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The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Continued from page* 4)

rich ore from the mine you worked in—is something rather difficult for us to realize as being almost universally practiced in the mines of Goldfield. It was like our recent flouting of the prohibition laws. Illegal, but everybody was doing it. To understand it you have to know the peculiar conditions which permitted it.

"The rich Goldfield mines were operated by 'leasers'—this is, by men who leased the right to take ore out of the rich ground located by men who lacked the capital to develop a going mine. These leases, of course, had time limits. And the operators, very naturally, wanted to get as much gold out of the ground before the leases terminated as possible.

"So, though they knew that the miners were walking out of diggings with loads of 'samples' of their best ore, the operators did not dare make too big an issue of the matter. For if the miners refused to go back to work, the operators would lose heavily. At one time the operators were taking out ore to the value of $130,000 a day. Every day that a mine was shut down would cost the operators exactly that $130,000. So they made the best of the situation. They hired watchmen, and to some extent the watchmen cut down the loss of ore by high-grading; but not very drastically. High-grading went on.

"And the extent of it is breathtaking. Ransome's United States Geological Survey (1909) says 'It is reported that miners in some cases refused $20 a day on development work in order to accept $5 a day with the opportunity for annexing illegal perquisites in the Mohawk. The extent to which "high-grading" went on in 1906 is incredible. Two shipments of stolen ore valued at $60,000 and $150,000 were seized on the cars. . . . It has been locally estimated that over $2,000,000 was stolen from the Mohawk, Red Top and Jumbo mines alone up to the later part of 1907. . . . '

"Tex Rickard was authority for the statement that in 1907 the Goldfield Consolidated Mines alone lost a full million dollars due to high-grading.

"Of course, if there had been no crooked buyers, ore stealing would have died a-borning. But there were assayers who were willing to buy stolen ore. A miner would bring in his load of 'high-grade'—leave it—and return next day. By that time, the ore would have been assayed. And the crooked assayer would pay the miner just half of what the ore was worth. If a high-grader wanted cash as soon as he delivered the ore, he would have to take just ten percent of what the assayer estimated the rock to be worth.

"In those days, gold was worth about $20 an ounce. If high-grading were possible today—with gold at $35 an ounce— Well, we're just lucky it isn't possible! It would surely zoom inflation."

George Armin Shaftel

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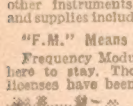

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Did You Ever Hate a Man Both Ways from the Belt Buckle?

THE LOBO OF SAGUERO BEND

A Hashknife Story

By W. C. TUTTLE

HASHKNIFE HARTLEY and Sleepy Stevens rode to the top of the main divide, where they drew up their horses and looked out over a big valley, blue in the afternoon haze. Far below them they could see the road, twisting around the sides of a deep canyon. A few buzzards spiraled high in the blue sky, and mountain quail whistled from a nearby thicket.

"Accordin' to all maps and information, that's Red Horse Valley," said Sleepy. "Mighty pretty to look at, pardner."

"Mighty pretty," agreed Hashknife. "Somewhere, down there in that blue haze, is the town of Saguero Bend—all downhill and the sun behind."

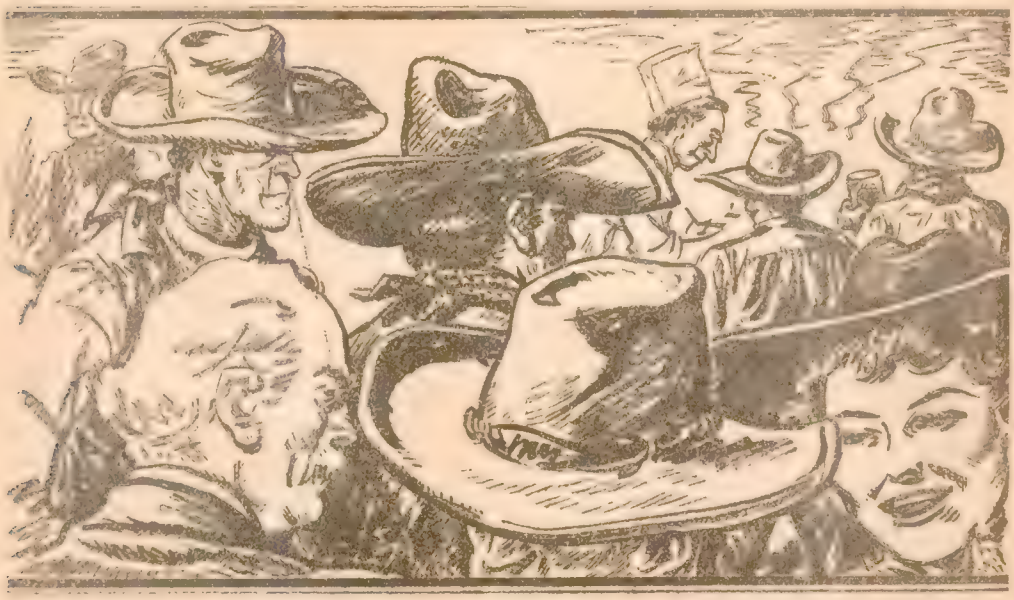
They swung off the crest and started down a long slope toward the road. Hashknife was six feet, several inches tall, exclusive of his high-heels and tall sombrero. He was lean-faced, long-armed, with a wide mouth and good teeth. His hair was of rather a neutral shade, with one lock hanging down almost to his right eyebrow. Sleepy was less than six feet tall, broad of shoulder, slightly bowed of legs. His face was blocky, grin-wrinkled, his eyes very blue and very innocent-looking. Hashknife's eyes were the gray of tempered steel, and they seemed to plumb the depths of anything or anybody. Few men ever looked him in the eye and forgot those level eyes, and few ever failed to look away first.

They were clad alike, in faded shirts, tight-fitting overalls, high-heel boots and sombreros. Both wore vests, stringy and shapeless, little more than pockets to carry their tobacco and papers. Both men wore hand-made gunbelts, and their holstered, black-handled Colt guns were alike. There was nothing fancy about these two rambling cowboys, nor their riding-rigs.

There was no reason for them going into Red Horse Valley, except that it happened to be on the other side of a hill. For years these two drifting cow-hands had been going over hills, just to see what was on the other side.

They reached the road along the canyon, on a lead horse, and the outfit stopped, one of the wheelers trying to kick a single-tree loose, when the stage shoved too hard.

Hashknife didn't have room to ride past the rear of the stage; so he dismounted quickly and ran past, trying to find out what happened to the driver. A masked man was at the curve, partly concealed by a jutting piece of rock, and he fired twice at Hashknife, who dived in toward the rocky wall, as he drew his gun. Hashknife went swiftly along the wall, but the man had swung up through a narrow fissure, which widened abruptly a dozen feet beyond. Sleepy was yelling at Hashknife, who called back:



bringing down a shower of rubble, as they skidded their horses down a cut-bank. The road was crooked and too narrow for driving safety, but seemed well traveled. They were close to a hair-pin curve, when they heard the crunch and rattle of wagon-wheels on the rough roadbed. They quickly swung their horses in single-file against the rocky wall, and a moment later the four horses of a stage outfit came around the curve, traveling at a quickening trot, but with nobody on the driver's seat.

Hashknife quickly spurred to the outer edge of the grade, forcing the leaders in against the rocky wall and jack-knifing the outfit.

Sleepy grabbed a handful of bridle "Hang onto that team, Sleepy; I'll handle this end."

Another man was running up the grade. He was hatless, swinging a gun in his right hand. He fired once at Hashknife, missing him by six feet, stubbed his toe and went sprawling, the gun spinning over the edge of the grade. Hashknife went slowly down to him, and the man sat up. He was gray, with a wrinkled face and a pair of small, brown eyes.

"By the muddy Missouri River!" he exclaimed. "Got me, huh? Well, dad-burn yore hide, yuh didn't git me 'thout a fight!"

"That's right," agreed Hashknife. "You sure made a good fight. But what was the fight about, my friend?"

The stage-driver sat up and stared at Hashknife.

"You—huh!" he grunted. "Why—hell, you ain't him!"

"You mean the man with the mask?"

"I hope to tell yuh! He-e-ey, I've done lost m' stage!"

"My pardner is holdin' it around the corner. Maybe we better go around and see if everythin' is all right."

IT WAS. Sleepy was glad to get rid of it. The driver explained:

"That there cross between a bull pup and a winder-shutter stuck me up. He says to me, 'Git off that stage, before I plug yuh.' Mister, I got off so fast that I slipped on the hub of that right-hand wheel, skidded right into the rear-end of that wheel-horse, lost the lines and never did git 'em.

"Bein' uphill, them broncs cain't git started fast. Anyway, I'm flat on terry-firmy, and that dad-burned bandit jist stood there, lettin' 'em go.

"Then he starts out after 'em, forgittin' that I've got a six-gun stuck inside m' pants, but I'm so fresh out of wind that I cain't pull her. But I got m' breath agin and I starts war-pathin' after him. Well, pretty quick I see somebody; so I fires m' one shot. Glad I missed."

"Thank yuh," said Hashknife soberly.

"Wasn't even close, huh?"

"Close don't count in anythin', except pitchin' horse-shoes."

"All m' life I've shot high and to the right. My name's Stony Moss. They nicknamed me 'Rollin' Stone' but that was too long. I drive the stage."

"That's fine," said Sleepy. "I hereby give yuh my interest in it, Stony."

"Well, I'm shore much obliged to yuh both. If it hadn't been for you fellers, I'd be shy one stage and four horses. You-all headin' for Saguero Bend?"

"That's right," replied Hashknife. "How far is it?"

"Fifteen miles, I reckon. Hope yo're there when I git back; I'd like to buy yuh a drink. I'm awful grateful right now, but I ain't got all m' wind back yet. See yuh later."

Stony Moss kicked off his brake, as he tightened his lines.

"Any idea who the masked gentleman was?" asked Hashknife.

"El Solo, I reckon. Don't know who else it could have been. *Adios, amigos.*"

Stony Moss drove away, waving back at them with his long-handled whip. Hashknife and Sleepy waved at him, and then mounted their horses.

"I hope that masquerader don't start

shootin' from up on that hill," said Sleepy.

"If he don't shoot any straighter than he did at me—we're safe," smiled Hashknife. "No, I reckon he high-tailed it as fast as possible. Sleepy, what did Stony say that bandit's name prob'ly was?"

"You heard it as plain as I did," replied Sleepy. "El Solo."

"Yeah, I thought that was it. El Solo. Prob'ly means The One."

Sleepy sighed and began rolling a cigarette, as they drifted slowly down the long grade.

"Always somethin'," he said. "Mebbe I won't like Saguero Bend. Mebbe I won't like Red Horse Valley. Prob'ly won't. But that won't make no difference."

"What are you worryin' about, Sleepy?"

"Not likin' a place—and havin' to stay there until you find out who El Solo is. Prob'ly jist some misguided saddle-slicker, who thinks he can pick up some easy money."

"He shot at me twice," reminded Hashknife quietly.

"Yeah, I know. Well, mebbe I can wile away the time—I dunno. Stony Moss shot at yuh, too."

"Stony," grinned Hashknife, "was all out of breath."

"A funny old *pelicano,*" laughed Sleepy. "Bein' fresh out of wind, and can't pull his gun—and then went war-pathin'. I like Stony."

"He's our kind of folks, Sleepy," said Hashknife. "He was sure on the trail of that masked man, and yuh can't blame him for takin' a pop at me. And all his life he has shot high and to the right. I'm glad he did. Well, we'll see what's in Red Horse Valley. We might be surprised."

"Or pained," added Sleepy. "Some day me and you are goin' to run our noses square into hot lead."

"Mebbe," said Hashknife. "Nobody knows what's written in the Big Book."

That was Hashknife's theory. The Big Book of Fate, in which there is an entry for every human, designating the day and date, together with the cause.

"If it says a shotgun, you won't never die from a busted neck," declared Hashknife. "Don't the Bible says somethin' about, 'The son of man shall go as it is written of him?' What more do yuh want—and with our own experiences. Even the law of averages ain't worked out for us. It ain't luck, Sleepy—it's fate. Our number ain't been hung up yet. Yuh can't tell—we might die from eatin' canned peaches."

"Oh, Death, where is thy sting?" quoted Sleepy, who loved peaches.

The town of Saguero Bend and nearly all of Red Horse Valley, for that matter,

was interested in the coming marriage of Kay Bradley and Colt King. Kay was known as Red Horse Valley's favorite daughter, and she well deserved the title. Kay was a grand girl, talented and pretty, while Colt King, the young foreman of the Quarter Circle M, was liked by everyone. That is, he was liked by everyone except Happy McGee, the deputy sheriff, who had recently acquired a deep hatred of the handsome Colt King. You see, Colt had made Happy promise to be the best man at the wedding, just at a time when Happy was enjoying the effects of several glasses of Saguero Bend liquor, and didn't realize what he was saying.

HAPPY was lean, hatched-faced, with sad eyes and a mop of unruly hair that was just too red to be natural. Happy had bowlegs and big hands—and no place to put his hands. He never knew what to do with them. His big feet were always in the way, too. And the worst of all, he didn't have anything to wear to a wedding. Best man! It must be awful. Did he have to do any talking?

"Sure," said poker-faced Dan Pierce, the sheriff. "When the preacher says to Colt, 'Do you take this woman to be yore lawful wedded wife?' you've got to say, 'He does.'"

"He does what?" asked Happy.

"How'd I know?" replied the sheriff soberly. "And, Happy, you've got to kiss the bride."

"Oh, m'Gawd!" breathed Happy. "Rur-right in front of everybody?"

"That's right—a big smack."

"Well, lovely dove," wailed Happy, "I might's well marry her m'self."

"Yo're a little late."

"Uh-huh. Well, I dunno—mebbe I can do her, Dave—but I doubt it. And soon's that weddin' is over, I'm goin' to poke Colt King right in the nose, dang his ornery hide. I—I hate him from the belt-buckle both ways."

"He's got to have a best-man, Happy."

"All right, all right—mebbe he has. But with all the men in this blasted valley, he had to pick me."

"He thinks yore his best friend, Happy."

"He's as loco as a shepherd—I hate him."

Hashknife and Sleepy rode into Saguero Bend and stabled their tired horses. Saguero Bend was just another cow town of the Southwest, part frame, part adobe construction, with false-fronts predominating. The main street was narrow, deep with dust, the buildings flanked with wooden sidewalks, or no sidewalks at all.

There was a woeful lack of paint on any of the buildings, and the signs were faded and sand-blasted, except a new sign atop the Ocotillo Saloon.

"I reckon we better tell the sheriff about that attempted holdup," said Hashknife.

"Judgin' from the looks of the rest of the place," remarked Sleepy, "he'll yawn and go back to sleep. There's the office over there, I reckon. Yuh can still make out part of the sign."

They found Happy McGee in there, half-asleep in the sheriff's chair, his feet on the desk-top. He didn't even tilt his hat back to see who they were.

"Yo're the sheriff, I suppose," said Hashknife. "We just thought we'd report that a lone bandit tried to stick up the afternoon stage, but the brave driver foiled his dastardly attempt."

"I ain't no sheriff," denied Happy quietly. "Prob'ly never will be a sheriff. I'm just a down-trodden deputy, which is got to be best man at a—hu-u-u-uh?"

HAPPY knocked his hat off his head and sat up, staring at Hashknife and Sleepy.

"What was that?" he asked anxiously. "A holdup, yuh say?"

"Fifteen miles north of here," said Hashknife quietly. "A lone bandit, masked, tried to rob the stage, but the driver, one Stony Moss, I believe he said his name was, completely foiled the attempt."

"Stony Moss foiled—hm-m-m-m. Yuh mean, he stopped the holdup? Heavenly days, did Stony *shoot* him away?"

"Knowin', as he does, that he always shoots high and to the right," said Hashknife, "Stony fell off the seat, hit one of the wheel horses on the rump, and the horses went on, carrying the treasure chest to safety."

Happy scratched his head, slightly bewildered.

"Yea-a-a-ah," he whispered. "To safety, huh? He fell off the seat and—well, what happened? Don't try to tell me that them four knot-headed broomtails ever stopped

of their own accord. Where-at is that stage?"

"We met 'em," said Sleepy. "They took one look at us and stopped dead. Then the masked bandit took a couple shots at m'pardner, rattled his hocks off the grade, and then cometh Stony Moss to retrieve his loss."

"Yeah," nodded Happy. "It's all very plain—but not to me."

"Stony said he thought it was El Solo," said Hashknife.

"He did? El Solo, eh? Huh! Maybe I better find the sheriff and tell him."

"That won't do much good," said Sleepy. "He won't stay there."

"No, that's right, too. But the sheriff ort to know about it, don't yuh think? Dave Pierce is awful nosey thataway. He don't want anythin' like that to happen and him not know about it."

"Well, if yuh happen to meet him, it's all right to tell him," said Hashknife. "It ain't exactly a secret, yuh know."

"Yuh can't keep a thing like that secret," said Happy. "Yuh know, I just realized that you two are strangers around here. I'm Happy."

"What about?" asked Sleepy soberly.

"That's m' name—Happy McGee. Pleased to meetcha."

"My name's Stevens," said Sleepy. "My high-pocket pardner is named Hartley."

"I'm still pleased to meetcha," said Happy. "Names don't mean a thing to me."

"Does El Solo mean anythin' to you?" asked Hashknife.

"Well—yeah—kinda. Yuh see, once in a while some feller pulls a stick-up around this country, and everybody says it's El Solo. 'Cause he works alone, some *Mejicano* named him El Solo. He ain't never made a big haul—yet—and we ain't got no idea who he is. Mebbe, some day"—Happy yawned—"mebbe he'll try to stick up this office—and we'll git him. I'll go find Dave and tell him."

Hashknife and Sleepy went up to the little hotel. A man rode in and got off his horse at the Ocotillo hitch-rack. They watched him walk into the saloon. He wore a black sombrero, black shirt and black chaps. Hashknife studied him thoughtfully. Sleepy didn't see the bandit on the grade. Hashknife smiled thoughtfully, as they went into the hotel. Hashknife's brief sight of the bandit showed that he was clad in black, and he was about the same size as the man who had gone into the saloon.

The little lobby was empty, and as they stood at the little counter, waiting for someone to come in, Happy McGee came in with Dave Pierce, the sheriff, who wanted all the details on the attempted holdup. They could only tell them what they saw and what Stony Moss told them. Pierce said:

"Did you get a good look at the masked man, Hartley?"

"Not exactly a good look," replied Hashknife. "You see, he shot twice at me, which didn't cause me to study his appearance very closely, Sheriff. Maybe Stony can tell you more than we can."

"Stony foiled him," said Happy soberly. "Wait'll *he* tells it."

"Stony is an honest, God-fearin' citizen," said the sheriff soberly.

"Yeah, and he's scared of everythin' else, too," added Happy.

"He shot at me," said Hashknife, "and then he stubbed his toe and fell down."

"Stony is all right," said the sheriff, "but he can't shoot straight."

"I admire his lack of ability," said Hashknife quietly.

AFTER the sheriff and deputy went out, Old Mike Moran, the hotel-owner, came limping in from the back of the hotel. Old Mike was one of the original settlers of Red Horse Valley, a little, squint-eyed, gray-haired man.

"Su-ure, I have a room," he said. "I have the President's soo-o-ot, and the br-r-ridal chamber; both empty. Will ye have either, or not, just as yuh like."

"We want just a plain room, with a soft bed," said Sleepy.

"Spoken like a man," declared Old Mike. "I have just that. Noomber six. It has a grand view, and it was bed-bugged only last week. Come wit' me, gentlemen."

A man came to the doorway, glanced in and went on. It was the man in the black clothes and black leathers.

"Who is that man?" Hashknife asked Old Mike.

"That," replied Old Mike, "is Peter King."

They went up to the room and Old Mike opened the dusty windows.

"Is Peter King related to Colt King, who is to be married soon?" Hashknife inquired.

"Aye, that he is—being Colt's father. Do you know Colt King?"

"No, we only heard about the wedding."

"And a finer couple you'd never see," declared Old Mike. "Oh, aye, that will be a fine marriage. Henry Bradley will make it the biggest marriage that was ever seen in Red Horse Valley. I've no doubt you'll be there."

"I don't reckon so," smiled Hashknife. "We're strangers here."

"That will mean nothin' to Henry Bradley."

"This Peter King," said Hashknife. "Has he a ranch?"

"Oh, aye, he has a ranch. Not very big. Runs it himself. It's the Bar Seventy-seven, twelve miles south of here."

"Doesn't his son work for him?"

"Colt?" Old Mike shook his head. "It has been said they don't get along so well together. Colt is foreman for the Quar-rter Circle M, which belongs to Uncle Billy Motley. Peter King likes his liquor and car-rds, while Colt likes neither. I don't think Peter is any too well pleased over the marriage, because he has no use for Henry Bradley. However, the boy is of age, and more, and he has a mind of his own."

"Have you ever heard of El Solo?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, aye," replied Old Mike soberly. "But I take it with a gr-rain of salt. Any bandit who works alone is called El Solo. Folk like a bugaboo. Well, I hope ye'll like it here."

After Old Mike went downstairs, Sleepy asked Hashknife why he asked about Peter King.

Hashknife smiled. "Yuh see," he explained, "the masked man who shot at me on the grade wore black chaps, black shirt and black hat—and he was about the same size as Peter King."

"If he ain't got no more brains than that, I'd call him El Loco," said Sleepy. "We'll see what Stony Moss seen, when he comes back, and I'll bet yuh a dollar against a doughnut that his description won't fit yours at all."

"Again," smiled Hashknife, "I'm all out of doughnuts."

"WE'VE heard," said Dave Pierce, the sheriff, "that you foiled El Solo, Stony."

"Foiled him?" queried Stony Moss. "Yeah, I done that, too, Dave; but first I nonplussed him."

"That," said Happy McGee, "is a word I ain't never met before."

"It means," exclaimed Stony expansively, "that I right away fix him so he don't know what t' do next. After that—well, I jist foiled him."

"Describe him," said the sheriff.

"Huh?"

"Tell us what he looked like."

"Well," replied Stony, squinting thoughtfully, "he was big. Prob'ly the biggest man I ever seen—big enough t' wrassel a grizzly."

"Two arms and two legs?" suggested Happy.

"All of that," agreed Stony. "Yeah, I'd say he was complete."

"What kind of clothes did he have on?" asked the sheriff.

"Well, lemme think a minute. Green shirt. Yeah, it was green."

"Red pants?" asked Harry.

"Kinda red, with a blue stripe, I think. Mebbe the shirt was blue."

"My Gawd!" gasped Happy. "You nonplussed Uncle Sam!"

"As a matter of fact," said the sheriff, "you don't know what color clothes he was wearin', Stony."

"Mebbe not, Dave—I was doin' a lot of thinkin', and it wasn't about his clothes. When you've got t' outsmart a bugger like that, you ain't payin' much attention to what he's a-wearin'."

"No, I suppose not."

"We heard," remarked Happy, "that them two fellers who blocked yore stage was quite a help to yuh, Stony."

"Hartley and Stevens? Oh, yeah—they helped. Nice fellers. But I'd have handled it m'self all right."

"You shot at Hartley," said the sheriff.

"Huh? Shot at him? Well, kinda. Yuh see, jist as I was levelin' off to spread his

mortal re-mains on the dirt, I seen that he wasn't m' victim; so I twisted the barrel of m' gun, and flung lead into space. Then I went down, so to speak, protectin' m'self, in case he misconstrues m' intentions."

"You were so danged excited that yuh stubbed yore toe and fell," declared Happy. "And that was after you shot *at* Hartley."

"You wasn't there, Happy," complained Stony. "You can't judge."

"Go ahead and fight," said the sheriff. "I didn't think your friendship would last long anyway—batchin' together."

HAPPY and Stony lived in a little shack on the outskirts of town, where they did much of their own cooking. It was much cheaper than living at a hotel. Hashknife and Sleepy came down there and had supper with them the day after the attempted holdup. Hashknife and Sleepy had met Uncle Billy Motley, Henry Bradley and Peter King. Uncle Billy Motley offered them jobs at the Quarter Circle M, and Henry Bradley had invited them to the wedding.

It seemed rather strange for two strangers to be invited to a wedding, but Henry Bradley said:

"We're friendly folks at the Lazy B, and a weddin' is a fine place to get acquainted. I'd sure admire to have yuh out there. And don't worry about dressin' up. This ain't no fashion show."

Hashknife and Sleepy thanked him, and assured him that they would attend.

Sleepy mentioned the fact that they wouldn't have to dress up at the wedding, but Stony quickly squelched Happy's whoop of relief.

"That don't mean you, Happy," said Stony. "Yo're best-man, and you've got to look like one."

"Is Happy goin' to be best-man?" asked Sleepy. "Gee, that's great! I can see him, now, standing up there, wearin' a swaller-tailed coat, red vest and a green tie."

"No pants?" asked Stony seriously.

"Pants is optional," replied Sleepy.

"I'll wear 'em," sighed Happy.

Colt King rode up to the shack and dismounted. He was a well-built, good-looking cowboy, about twenty-five years of age. Happy introduced him to Hashknife and Sleepy.

"We was just tellin' Happy what he'd have to wear to the weddin', Colt," said Stony.

"That's fine," said Colt soberly. "I want him to look nice."

"You be damned!" snorted Happy. "You imposed upon me when I was drunk. I didn't know what I was promisin'."

"The moral of that is to stay sober," said Sleepy.

"All right, all right," said Happy, "don't worry about me; I'll be there and I'll be wearin' the right duds."

"Where-at you goin' to git 'em?" asked Stony curiously.

"Ne' mind, I'll be Johnny-at-the-rat-hole, when the time comes."

They all walked back to the main street, with Colt King leading his horse. Some of the windows were already lighted. They could hear voices in the sheriff's office, raised somewhat above conversational pitch.

"Somebody must have a mad on," remarked Happy.

The man doing the loud talking was Stan Corbin, owner of the Double Arrow, a tall, lantern-jawed cowman, with flat cheek-bones and prominent teeth. Dave Pierce, the sheriff, was at his desk, listening. Dave had a poker-face.

"I tell yuh, they took all twenty-five!" shrilled Corbin. "Worth a hundred and fifty dollars apiece. That's—lemme see-e-e. At a hundred, they'd be worth twenty-five hundred—and—what's a half of twenty-five hundred?"

"Yuh divide it by two," said Happy soberly. "Two into two goes once, and nothin' to carry. Two goes into five—no, yuh can't, 'cause five ain't a even number; so yuh borry one from the rest and make it six. Two goes into six three times and —how many is that?"

"What have yuh lost, Stan?" asked Colt King.

"Twenty-five head of damn fine horses!" snapped the cowman. "I was aimin' to ship 'em to Frisco. Had 'em in a corral at Wolf Creek, but somebody took 'em. Headed 'em south, Colt. By God, if I—"

"You've been hurt," interrupted Colt. "Yore sleeve's bloody!"

"Yeah, I know—nicked. I accidently cut in ahead of the herd. They killed my horse and nicked me. That's why I'm so

late gettin' here. I'm goin' down and have Doc Post fix up my arm."

Corwin went barging out of there and headed down the street. Colt King looked grimly at the sheriff, as he said: "Looks like they're at it again, Dave."

Dave Pierce nodded slowly.

"It's happened before?" said Hashknife.

"Yeah—but not for quite a while," said Colt King. "They almost cleaned the valley of horses the last time. Got thirty from the Quarter Circle M last time. Well, I've got to be goin' back. See yuh later, folks."

SLEEPY, Stony and Happy went over to the Ocotillo Saloon, while Hashknife sprawled in a chair and talked with Dave Pierce. Hashknife wasn't interested in horse thieves—unless they stole *his* horse, but he was just a little interested in El Solo, because El Solo had shot twice at him. He led the conversation around to Peter King.

"Pete's all right," the sheriff said. "Him and Colt don't get along; so they don't live together, but yuh can't hold that against him, Hashknife. Pete runs his little ranch, and don't ask odds of anybody. Pete's hard. Yuh never see him laugh, and he don't talk much. About eight years ago he was accused of stealin' horses by Henry Bradley. Pete wasn't arrested. Maybe Bradley went off half-cocked, I dunno. Anyway, there's been no love lost between them since then, and Pete had kinda kept by himself."

"I notice that Peter King dresses in black," remarked Hashknife.

The sheriff looked sharply at Hashknife.

"I dunno," he said vaguely. "Maybe so. Never gave it a thought. Just why did you mention that, Hashknife?"

"Oh, I dunno—it was just a remark, I reckon."

"Yea-a-ah?" queried the sheriff quietly. "By any chance—did that masked man wear black?"

"Well," smiled Hashknife, "I'm a lot like Stony—I was too busy to look closely."

"Yeah, I suppose so," said the sheriff thoughtfully.

"Suppose," suggested Hashknife, "that the holdup had been a success—would he have profited much?"

"He would," replied the sheriff. "There was a registered package containing ten thousand in currency, sent by Ace Breen, of the Ocotillo. Not havin' any bank here, ever so often Breen sends money out to the bank at Red Rock. But he didn't get it; so everythin' is all right."

ACE BREEN, owner of the Ocotillo Saloon and Gambling Palace, came over to the office. It was the first time Hashknife had met Breen. In addition to the Ocotillo, Breen owned the Five Dot outfit, a small place several miles south of Saguero Bend. He was about six feet tall, rather good-looking, hard-eyed, hard of jaw. He had heard about Stan Corwin's trouble with horse thieves, and wanted to know more about it. The talk drifted around to the supposedly El Solo's failure to rob the stage.

"It saved yo're money, Ace," the sheriff said.

"Yeah, I suppose it did. Still, I couldn't lose much, because I was careful to have the package registered. I don't take any chances with my money, Dave. I had the postmaster help me wrap it, after we counted it."

"How many people know you sent that package?" asked Hashknife.

Breen looked sharply at Hashknife for several moments. "Yeah, I see your angle," he said. "But only me and the postmaster knows I shipped this one. I usually send money out by mail, but I don't have any regular time to send it. I think that feller was just takin' a chance that there might be money on the stage—which there rarely is."

"Are yuh goin' out to the weddin', Ace?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know—yet, Dave. You see, Henry Bradley asked me to come. As Ace Breen, the gambler, I don't think I should. I told Henry so, and he said, 'Well, come as Ace Breen, owner of the Five Dot.' I don't know—maybe I'll go. Henry is goin' to show everybody a good time. Are you invited, Hartley?"

"Yeah," smiled the tall cowboy. "It was very nice of him to invite me and my pardner, us bein' strangers."

"That's the way folks are in this valley," said Breen. "Best on earth. Kay Bradley is a mighty fine girl, and Colt King will make her a good husband."

It was the night of the wedding at the Bradley ranch, and Stony Moss, the stage

driver believed in being organized. Several drinks of Saguero Bend liquor had put him in shape for a fight or a frolic. He opened the door of the shack where he and Happy McGee lived, bumped his right shoulder against the door-frame as he came in, and stopped short.

There was a lighted lamp on the table, together with a partly emptied bottle of liquor, and beside the table stood Happy McGee. On the floor was a cardboard box, the top and bottom several feet apart, and there was a pile of crumpled tissue-paper. Stony had never seen Happy dressed like that before. He came forward cautiously, eyes wide.

"Oh, m' Gawd, Happy, what's done happened to thee?" he whispered.

"How'd I look to yuh?" asked Happy hoarsely.

"I ain't goin' to be too quick with the answer," said Stony. "I know what that Ocotillo whiskey does to yore eyes, and I ain't goin' to be too hasty."

HAPPY McGEE had on a dress suit, the coat at least four sizes too big, while the pants were six inches too short, and so small around the waist that Happy had them fastened with a horse-blanket safety-pin. There was an expanse of several inches between the vest and the top of the pants.

The polished bosom of the white shirt bulged like the breast of a pouter-pigeon, and the high, bat-wing collar threatened at any time to cut off Happy's generous ears. The necktie, tied in a clumsy bow, was halfway around the left side of the collar. Happy said mournfully:

"The danged ad in the paper said they could send yuh the proper clothes f'r any occasion. All they needed was yore measure and yore address, plus the money. I told 'em I wanted the best they had for a weddin'—and look at me!"

"Yeah—I'm a-lookin'," sighed Stony. "Mebbe we better have a drink, huh?"

"Pour her into a glass, will yuh?" asked Happy. "When I try to upend a bottle, this danged collar slices m'ears. You ain't seen the hat, have yuh?" Look! She's a humdinger."

Trusting entirely to luck, Happy bent down and picked up a silk topper. Snapping back one sleeve he gracefully placed it on his head. It was size six and seven-eighths, while Happy normally wore a seven and three-eighths.

"I expect," said Stony soberly, "to see smoke come out of it any time."

"Yeah, but it falls right off," complained Happy.

"Aw, shucks, we can tie it on with whang-leather strings. Here—take a big drink and start gettin' happy over it. We ain't got no time to waste."

"Will I do?" asked Happy seriously.

"Yeah, you'll do—until some wild-eyed puncher gets a look at yuh."

"Ign'rant vipers," said Happy. "I'll have to tuck m' pants in my boots. The short legs won't show thataway. I don't see how they made all the mistakes they made. I measured m'self, Stony—with that tape-measure of yours."

"Yuh did, eh?" Stony smacked his lips over his drink. "Well, didja allow for the first six inches bein' cut off?"

"It is?" gasped Happy. "Lovely dove, it's lucky I didn't measure only the pants. I'd have never got into the coat."

"Well, how'd they know what size coat to send yuh?"

"I dunno. I told 'em I wore a sixteen collar, and for them to use their own judgment."

"Well, don't worry," advised Stony. "We'll roll up the sleeves and tie yore hat on. Here's another jolt of tarantler-juice."

Happy drank it, carefully balancing the top-hat on his head. He drew a deep breath and said soberly:

"Colt King, do you take this woman to be yore lawful wedded wife? He does!" Happy jerked his head in violent affirmation, and the hat fell off.

He aimed a kick at it, hit the leg of the table instead and howled with pain.

"Yo're worried son," said Stony. "Look at me. I'm as cool as a ice."

"Yeah," said Happy, "and yo're as drunk as a fiddler's pup. He'p me on with m' boots, will yuh, Stony; I'm plumb ramrodded from the hips on down."

"And we better make it fast," said Stony. "The folks was drivin' into the Lazy B when I brought the stage past a while ago. I had t' dump off some more packages for Hank Bradley. Looked like bonded whiskey t' me."

HENRY BRADLEY had sworn to make this the biggest wedding party ever held in Red Horse Valley, and he was sparing no expense to make good on his boast. The huge sycamores around the big ranch-house were strung with gay-colored Chinese lanterns, fires blazed in the big barbecue pits, and the long tables were already piled with food and dishes. A multitude of coffee-pots were already steaming over a grill, fat kegs of beer rested on saw-horses, convenient to the tables, and there was a plentiful supply of more potent liquor available.

A three-piece, cowboy orchestra quietly practiced the wedding march, with their own variations. None of them could read music, so their version of the march had been derived from a broken music-box, which was shy several of its pins. In that adaptation could be found certain strains of "The Dying Cowboy," "They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree," and "Bury Me Not," but who cared? Certainly not the orchestra.

The fences were packed with wagon and buggy teams, together with dozens of saddle-horses. Cattlemen and their wives, cowboys and their girls, all in their Sunday best were there to help celebrate a wedding fiesta *par excellence*. Hashknife and Sleepy came out with Dave Pierce, the sheriff, who introduced them to everyone available. Uncle Billy Motley, five-feet-six, wearing a four, triple-A boot, did a double-shuffle on the front porch and yelled:

"I'm a hairy wolf, and it's my night t' howl!"

"Billie-e-e-e!" shrilled Ma Motley's voice from inside the open doorway.

"Shot by a varmint hunter!" exclaimed a cowboy, and Uncle Billy departed in the direction of the barbecue pits.

The Reverend Duncan McLeod, slightly deaf, always dour, arrived, joined the crowd near the barbecue pits, and openly deplored the "ongodly dapravity and sinful thirst," of the assembled men, only to grudgingly accept a "bit of a thimbleful—and ye don't need to search for a thimble—a glass will do, thank ye."

Happy McGee and Stony Moss arrived. The barbecue cook took one look at Happy, dropped his huge fork and put both hands over his eyes. The men came in close and looked at Happy, who stood there, owl-eyed, but miserable.

Those tight-fitting pants had pulled out of Happy's boots, and were wrinkled to his knees. The coat sagged down and the shirt-bosom bulged up, and his necktie had slipped entirely off his collar. No one said anything. The fire crackled, and the cook picked up his long fork.

"I'll massacree the first damn man who makes a re-mark," said Happy in a dreary monotone.

"Mon, ye sure look gaudy," someone remarked.

"Who the hell said that?" asked Happy sharply.

"The minister!" whispered Stony.

"Oh!"

"Come down to the bunkhouse," whispered Stony. "Maybe I can pull yuh out straight and shove yuh in a little."

Happy followed him, breaking the tension.

"That's what they call a full-dress," said someone.

"We'll, he sure is," said Uncle Billy Motley. "I'd be afraid to wear one for fear somebody'd tie them tails around a tree and leave me there to starve."

The orchestra began playing, and the crowd drifted back to the big house. Colt King had arrived, nervous, anxious to have it over. Someone told him he'd better go down to the bunkhouse and find Happy. Henry Bradley came to Colt and told him that everything had been planned. He and Happy were to join Kay and her bridesmaids at the foot of the stairs, as they came down, and all he had to do was walk the length of the room, stand under the big floral bell and try to answer a few simple questions.

Colt hurried down to see Happy McGee, while the crowd found places in the big main room. A wide staircase led to the second floor, and all necks were craned in that direction, watching for the bride. The minister took his place at the end of the room, peering out at the crowded room from over the tops of his glasses.

Colt and Happy came in. Happy had been adjusted, but looked as though he might bolt at any moment. It gave the nervous crowd something to look at. Happy had been frightened into sobriety, and would have given ten years of his life to have been miles away from there.

Then the orchestra started the wedding march on a signal from upstairs. It wasn't very good music. In fact, it was rather bad, because the players didn't get away together, the fiddle being several bars ahead of the bull-fiddle and guitar. But no one seemed to care, because the bride and her maids had appeared at the top of the stairs.

Henry Bradley was standing in front of the open doorway, looking at the stairs, and Happy McGee was clutching at Colt King's arm, when from somewhere outside came the smashing report of a .45. The orchestra jerked to a spasmodic stop. Henry Bradley was coming forward, reaching out both hands, as though seeking a support, and then he crashed down, almost in the middle of the room.

Hashknife and Sleepy, standing at the back of the room, raced outside, while Dave Pierce, the sheriff, went out through a window. The place was in an uproar. Doctor Post was there. Everything was confusion. Men were crowding outside, when Pierce, Hashknife and Sleepy came up on the steps, bringing a man with them. The sheriff had caught him just outside the window. He was Peter King.

No one said anything. Even the sheriff didn't know what to do. Colt King came out through the crowd.

"Henry Bradley is dead, men," he said.

Then he stood there, staring at his father.

Peter King was wearing his old black shirt, black chaps and black hat.

"I didn't shoot him—I—I was just lookin'," he said quietly.

"Lookin', eh?" said one of the men.

"I wasn't invited," he said slowly, "and I—I kinda felt I'd like to see my own son get married."

"You wasn't invited?" queried Uncle Billy. Peter King shook his head.

"You was awful handy to the shootin', King," said the sheriff. "Maybe you saw who fired the shot."

"I was just comin' around the corner, Dave, and I wasn't where I could see."

"Yuh better hold him, Sheriff," advised Stan Corbin. "Him and Bradley wasn't friends."

"I aim to, Stan," said the sheriff, and led Peter King away.

Colt King went back into the house, white-faced, unnerved by the tragedy. There could be no thoughts of a wedding now. Tongues were buzzing in there that Peter King had killed Henry Bradley. Colt couldn't see Kay now. Maybe he didn't want to see her just at this time. The minister was trying to sympathize with everybody at the same time. There was an odor of burning beef, as the cook had left the barbecue pits, and the loaded tables were forgotten.

Hashknife and Sleepy rode back to town with Dave Pierce and his prisoner. Peter King had nothing more to say, and no one talked about the tragedy. They locked him in a cell and went back to the office. People came down there, as they drifted back to town. Ace Breen came over.

"Dave, I saw Peter King there on the porch, after you brought him in, and he didn't have any gun on him," he said.

"I know," nodded the sheriff.

"You can't shoot without a gun."

"That's right. But the place will be searched in daylight, Ace—you can always shoot and then throw away the gun."

"I see-e-e. Well, I never thought of that. Did he say anything that might show he was guilty?"

"He didn't say anything after we left the ranch, Ace. If we can't find the gun, we'll have to turn him loose."

"And then," added Hashknife, "you'll have to prove he fired the shot."

"Yeah," admitted the sheriff, "we'll have to prove it. But Henry Bradley is a big man in this valley—was, I mean—and Peter King ain't well liked."

"Bradley was a fine man," said Ace

Breen. "I haven't anything against Pete King, but I realize that a Red Horse jury won't need a lot of evidence to hang Pete King—if he isn't hung ahead of a jury trial."

"We'll try and prevent that," said the sheriff quickly.

Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel and found Uncle Billy Motley and Colt King in the little lobby.

"Do yuh mind if we come up to yore room for a little talk, Hartley?" the little cattleman said.

"Wish yuh would," replied the tall cowboy, wondering what this was all about.

They went up to the room. There was only one chair; so three of them sat on the bed.

"You don't know what this is all about, Hartley—but I do," Uncle Bill said quietly. "You just stop and consider that I've been a member of the Cattlemen's Association for twenty-five years. I get reports and I hear things. Know what I mean?"

"That damned Bob Marsh again!" wailed Sleepy.

"That's the answer," said Uncle Billy. "Bob Marsh is my nephew."

Bob Marsh was secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, and a special obsession of Sleepy Stevens, who blamed him every time they got into a tough case.

"We've worked for Bob Marsh, Uncle Billy," said Hashknife.

Uncle Billy leaned forward and pointed a forefinger at Hashknife.

"You ain't workin' for Bob Marsh now—yo're workin' for Bill Motley—do yuh understand? I don't care what it costs. I want you to prove who killed Henry Bradley tonight."

"Just like that," said Sleepy, snapping his fingers.

"If Bob Marsh ain't a danged liar—" began Uncle Billy.

"He most certainly is!" interrupted Sleepy.

"Well, let it go at that. C'mon, Colt—it's all settled. Good night, gents."

They walked out and closed the door.

Hashknife and Sleepy looked at each other soberly.

"Sudden little rascal," remarked Hashknife.

"Yeah," sighed Sleepy. "An uncle of Bob Marsh. Yuh know I never figured that a tarantler like Bob Marsh ever had any relatives. And that little whippoorwill spoke as though he was proud of Bob Marsh. Yuh never can account for taste in folks. And so we're hired—jist like that! Don't even ask if we'll do it. Yeah, he's quite a lot like Bob Marsh—arrogant thataway."

"I wonder why Henry Bradley was shot," said Hashknife soberly.

Sleepy sighed and pulled off his boots. "I reckon the hills will have to wait a while," he said.

EVIDENTLY the folks of Red Horse Valley were not content to leave the case to the tender mercies of the law. Many of them came to Saguero Bend next day to demand swift action. They demanded an eye for an eye, and they seemed to take it for granted that Peter King was the murderer. Dave Pierce, the sheriff, was troubled.

He told Hashknife that if the coroner's jury voted to try King for the murder, he was afraid that the men wouldn't wait for a trial. Hashknife asked to talk with Peter King. The sheriff did not enthuse. After all, why should he allow a drifting cowboy to talk with his prisoner? A rather curious request, it seemed to the sheriff. He looked questioningly into the level, gray eyes of the tall cowboy, hesitated, looked away and said quietly:

"I—I don't reckon it'll hurt anythin'; c'mon."

Peter King was not a talkative man, being rather defiant. He looked curiously at Hashknife and the sheriff, but said nothing, except to remark that they didn't make the cells big enough to entertain folks.

"Hartley wanted to talk with yuh, Pete—but he didn't say why," said the sheriff.

Before Hashknife had a chance to start his conversation, Happy McGee came in, bringing Jimmy Keene, one of the Bradley cowpunchers.

"Jimmy just came in, Dave," said Happy. "They found this here six-gun in a rosebush about twenty feet from the front porch. It's been shot once."

The sheriff stepped out of the cell and took the gun. It was a single-action, Colt .45, a weathered old weapon that had seen much service. Peter King was staring through the bars at the gun, his eyes wide.

The sheriff turned and looked at Peter King.

"Recognize this gun, Pete?" he said quietly.

Peter King's voice was a little husky, as he replied, "I ought to—I've packed it for twenty years, Dave."

"I'll lock it in the safe. Happy, you and Jimmy better come and witness this package—it's damned important to the law."

The three men went back to the office, leaving Hashknife with Peter King.

"My gun," said King, "I left it home last night."

"You live alone on yore ranch?" asked Hashknife.

King nodded. "I run it alone," he said.

"Were you invited to the weddin'?" asked Hashknife.

"Hank Bradley sent word by one of his riders that I'd be welcome," replied King. "It wasn't an invitation, Hartley. He didn't ask me to come."

King's muscular hands gripped his overall-clad knees.

"Me and Hank Bradley ain't friends—wasn't friends, Hartley—but yuh see, my kid was gettin' married. I—I kinda wanted to see it. After all, he's my kid. I raised him. Maybe we didn't get along. That's all right. I never held it against Colt. I mind my own business."

It was a long speech for Peter King.

"I don't blame yuh, King; it was the human thing to do," said Hashknife. "You've lived here a long time, and you know everybody. Of all the folks in Red Horse Valley, who would you suspect of killin' Henry Bradley?"

"Not one," replied King.

"Is there anybody who would profit by him bein' dead?"

"Nobody but his daughter, Hartley."

"Men," said Hashknife quietly, "don't commit murder for nothin'—unless they are crazy. They kill for revenge, gain, to save their own skin, or in the heat of anger. This murder wasn't for gain, to save a skin—and certainly not in a fit of anger, because there had been no quarrel. That leaves revenge—or insanity."

"Hartley," said Peter King quietly, "yo're smart, don'tcha know it?"

"No," smiled Hashknife, "I'm not smart. Do you know of any insane folks in this valley?"

Peter King shook his head. "No, I don't, Hartley."

"That leaves revenge."

King laughed and shook his head. "I'm afraid yo're barkin' up the wrong tree, Hartley. I've known Hank Bradley a long time, and I've never heard of any trouble between him and anybody else—not that kind of trouble."

The sheriff and deputy came back. Hashknife was finished with his talk, and the sheriff unlocked the cell.

"Much obliged, King," said Hashknife soberly. "See yuh later."

"Glad to have yuh," said Peter King. "Come any time."

THEY went back to the office and found Uncle Billy Motley there. He asked how Peter King was feeling, and what he had to say.

"Colt is pretty badly busted up," he said. "He's gone out to the Lazy B."

"Who wouldn't be?" queried Happy McGee. "Marriage busted, father-in-law a-layin' cold in death, and his father in jail. How'd yuh expect he'd be—like a medderlark?"

"Is there anythin' new?" asked Uncle Billy, ignoring Happy.

"Yeah," replied the sheriff, "there is, Uncle Billy. This mornin' they found a loaded six-shooter in a [illegible] about twenty feet from the porch at the Lazy B. One shell was fired."

"Heavenly days!" snorted the little cattleman. "Anybody recognize it?"

"Most anybody, Uncle Billy—even Peter King."

"His gun?" gasped Uncle Billy.

"One he's packed for twenty years."

"I'll be a help to the heathen!" snorted Uncle Billy. "His gun! Well, what did he have to say about that?"

"Nothin'."

Uncle Billy walked to the doorway, cuffed his hat down over one eye and went up the street. Hashknife smiled. "Quite a person," he said.

"The finest," said Happy, "but jist a little upset right now."

Hashknife and Sleepy found Uncle Billy at the Ocotillo Saloon, having a drink with Ace Breen. Uncle Billy rarely took a drink, but now he was in a black mood, and

needed a stimulant. He hated to tell Colt about the gun. It was all the evidence the law needed to put a rope around the neck of Peter King. Uncle Billy said:

"You was there when they brought in the gun, Hartley—what did Pete King have to say about it?"

"Well, he identified it as bein' his gun," replied Hashknife.

"Didn't deny it, eh?" queried the gambler.

"How could he?"

"Well, didn't he deny anything?" asked the gambler.

"No, he didn't deny anythin'."

"Well, don't he realize that they'll hang him?"

"I suppose he does. I can't imagine a man bein' that ignorant."

"Pete King ain't ignorant," declared Uncle Billy. "He's smart."

"Not too smart," smiled the gambler. "If he'd been smart he'd have done his killing at some place except a wedding—and not get caught."

"Even a smart man makes mistakes," said Hashknife soberly.

"Yeah," sighed Uncle Billy, "I reckon they do. Pete made his last night. I'll buy a drink."

UNCLE BILLY went over to the hotel with Hashknife and Sleepy.

"That deal I made with yuh last night still goes," he declared.

"Then you still think Peter King is innocent?" asked Hashknife.

"I don't now, Hartley. Yuh can't get away from that evidence."

"Then why keep on tryin' to prove he didn't do it, Uncle Billy?"

"Oh, just kinda puttin' salve on m' soul, I reckon. Mebbe I ain't the first danged fool that fought for a lost cause. It is lost, ain't it?" he asked plaintively.

"No," replied Hashknife quietly, "it ain't lost, Uncle Billy—jist kinda misplaced."

"Just kinda—hu-u-uh?" Uncle Billy squinted up at the tall cowboy.

"Misplaced," added Hashknife.

Uncle Billy cuffed his hat down over one eye and shoved his hands deep in his pockets.

"Don't tell me nothin'," he begged. "I'll take yore word for it. Bob Marsh told me one time that you could—"

"Yo're a uncle to one awful liar, Uncle Billy," interrupted Sleepy.

"Let it go as she lies," said the old cattleman. "I won't argue. See yuh later, and may the good Lord bless yuh, High-pockets. *Adios, compadres.*"

THE verdict of the coroner's jury was a foregone conclusion. The finding of the gun, belonging to Peter King, cinched the case against him, and he was bound over to the next term of court, charged with first-degree murder. An unfriendly crowd watched Dave Pierce take King back to jail, and then went to have a few drinks and offer odds that King would hang.

Hashknife went down to the jail, where he found Uncle Billy Motley. The little cattleman sat there, fighting his battered old hat.

"By doggie, I don't like this here bettin' on a man's life, but I bet ten dollars against a hundred that they won't hang Pete King," he said.

"One to ten, eh?" mused Hashknife. "That's a good bet, even if yuh lose."

"Suppose they lynch him?" asked Happy McGee. "Does that cover the bet?"

"Mebbe," said Uncle Billy. "Shucks, I better find out. I was bettin' on the law—not on a wolf pack. I'll go back and have that cleared up."

"Who is offerin' the odds?" asked Hashknife.

"The Ocotillo," replied Happy. "I reckon Uncle Billy is the only one to make a bet."

"Did King have anythin' further to say about that gun?" asked Hashknife.

"Not much," replied the sheriff. "He did say that he left the gun and belt on his bunk."

"Why didn't he pack the gun with him?"

"Well, he said he didn't think that a weddin' was any place to pack a gun."

"A jury'd love that," sighed Happy.

"You didn't pack yore gun," said the sheriff.

"I didn't have to—I was dressed to kill. I lost that danged hat, and it cost me ten dollars to make it good. The pants split in the back, too. If anybody ever asks me to be best-man again—there won't be no weddin', 'cause I'll kill the bridegroom."

"You looked awful purty," said Sleepy soberly. "If yuh ask me, I'd say that somebody tried to shoot you and got Henry Bradley instead."

"Could have," said Happy. "I was right in line with the front doorway. By golly, do yuh really think—shucks, there ain't nobody that'd want to gun me down, Sleepy."

"Did you look in the mirror that night, Happy?"

"No, I don't reckon I did. We ain't got none at the shack."

"Well," said Sleepy seriously, "I'll say that you was an awful temptation to anybody with a gun."

DAVE PIERCE wanted to ride out and look around the Lazy B ranch; so Hashknife rode with him. Sleepy stayed to play a few games of pool with Happy McGee. They found Colt King at the ranch, talking with Kay. There were several women there: kindly neighbors, filled with sympathy and advice. Jimmy Keene showed them where the gun had been found.

Hashknife wandered around the house, looking over the layout. The front porch was on the south side. Near the west corner was the window, where the sheriff had made his exit and ran into Peter King, who claimed he came around from the west side too late to see the shot fired.

On the east side of the house was located the barbecue pits. Hashknife questioned the old cook, who had been in charge of preparing the roasted meats.

"Well, I didn't see anybody," said the cook. "Yuh see, I wanted to see the weddin' ceremony; so I left the pits and went in through the kitchen. I was on the front row, apron and all, when the shot was fired."

The kitchen doorway was on the east side, near the rear. Hashknife asked the cook if anybody was in the kitchen, when he came in from the pits.

"I ain't sure," replied the cook. "They was crowded pretty tight around the dinin' room doorway, but I shoved through. I was kinda excited, I guess."

Hashknife and Sleepy talked with Colt King, who had heard the verdict of the coroner's jury. The sheriff asked Colt how Kay was taking it.

"Pretty hard," said Colt miserably. "It's a terrible mess. It would be bad enough if somebody else had done it—but my own father—"

"Son," said Hashknife quietly, "you don't think for a minute that Peter King killed him, do yuh?"

"Why—" Colt stared at the tall cowboy for several moments. "Don't you?"

"Maybe I'm funny," said Hashknife slowly, "but I never believe a man is guilty until he's proved guilty. Nothin' has been *proved* against yore father."

"Well, that coroner's jury—and he admits it is his gun. I don't see—"

"Colt, did you ever feel that yore father wasn't exactly smart?"

"No, I—well, no, I never thought that. You mean—the man who killed Henry Bradley wasn't smart?"

"'Course I'm just guessin'," smiled Hashknife, "but my hunch is that he *thinks* he's smart, which makes him kinda dumb."

"I don't understand, Hartley."

"Any man," said Hashknife, "who thinks in his own mind that he's smart usually turns out to be the most ignorant of his breed. Somebody said a long time ago that the smartest men are those who know in their own minds just how darned little they know."

"Why was Henry Bradley shot, Hashknife?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm not smart enough to answer that one, Dave," laughed Hashknife. "That question could only be answered by the man who fired that shot."

"And they'll hang my father for it," said Colt miserably.

"When they do," said Hashknife, "I'll believe yo're right, Colt."

THEY left the Lazy B and Hashknife insisted on going down to Peter King's Bar 77 spread. It was a long ride to the little shack in the sycamores. There was no stock in the stable or corrals, and there was plenty water. The ranchhouse was unlocked, but they did not find the gun-belt on the bunk.

Everything was in order, proving that Peter King was not slovenly. Even the windows were clean, the floors swept, the bunk neat.

The sheriff was curious to know why Hashknife had said that the killer of Henry

Bradley thought he was smart, but wasn't. Hashknife merely smiled.

"Yuh know," remarked the sheriff, as they rode back to Saguero Bend, "I can't understand yore interest in this deal, Hashknife. Yo're a stranger here and you act like you was hired to do some detectin'. I don't *sabe* it."

"Oh, I'm just nosey, I reckon," smiled Hashknife.

"I'm not complainin'," said the sheriff. "I need help. There's an election in November."

"Well, they could help yore cause a lot by hangin' Peter King."

"Yeah, that's right, but I'd hate to hang an innocent man just to get elected for another term. But I'll tell yuh this much, Hashknife; if we can't find a better victim than Peter King, I'm afraid that Uncle Billy will lose his ten dollars. Court won't convene for two weeks."

"Two weeks," mused Hashknife. "A trial will take at least a week. If he's convicted, they won't hang him for a month or more. Shucks, we've got plenty time, Dave."

"Plenty time for what, Hashknife?"

"To find the man who killed Henry Bradley."

"That sounds good. But don't figure on that much time. Red Horse Valley might take the law in their own hands."

"Yeah," admitted Hashknife, "they might, at that. We'll have to watch it pretty close."

"Are you goin' to stay in Saguero Bend that long, Hashknife?"

"Me and Sleepy are funny thataway, Dave—and there's only the hills callin' us. They have been there a long time—and after all, what's time to a hill?"

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy sat on the rickety, old fence that partly surrounded the cemetery at Saguero Bend, and watched two men finishing the grave for Henry Bradley. From their perch on the fence they could look down at the town, and the little unpainted church, entirely surrounded by horse-drawn vehicles of every kind, where the Reverend Duncan McLeod preached the longest funeral service ever held in the valley. Hashknife and Sleepy did not go to the services. The two grave-diggers came over to the fence to rest. It was mighty hard digging. There was no grass, and mighty little foliage of any kind in the cemetery. The wooden grave-markers stood in uneven rows, some of them rotted off at the bottom and leaning drunkenly.

Sleepy pointed at a white slab of wood and remarked:

"August thirteenth must be an unlucky day around here. Henry Bradley was killed on that date, and there's another killed on the same day of the month."

"That was last year," said one of the men. "He was Len Forrest, one of the county commissioners. A horse kicked him in the head."

"I never believed that, Newt," said the other man. "A horse can't kick yuh right on top of the head."

"Yuh could, if yuh stooped."

"Yeah."

The two men filled their pipes. It was hot up there. They could see some activity around the church, indicating that the services were over. Hashknife and Sleepy got off the fence and sauntered through the cemetery, reading the inscriptions on the head-stones. Some were entirely faded out. Hashknife stopped and squinted thoughtfully at a head-marker.

"Jim Payne, died August thirteenth," he muttered. "That's kinda funny, pardner."

Sleepy was ten feet head of Hashknife, and he said:

"That ain't no funnier than this one here, Hashknife."

"Yuh mean—another August thirteenth?"

"Yeah—man named Frank Allen."

Hashknife rubbed his lean jaw and rolled a cigarette. Here were four men, all died on the same date. Two might be a coincidence, but four—

He went ahead and checked on the one Sleepy was looking at. The funeral cortege was winding up the hill. Hashknife wrote the three names on a piece of paper, and went back toward the new grave.

The services at the grave were very brief. Uncle Billy Motley was one of the pall-bearers, and as soon as the service was over Hashknife drew him aside, together with Dave Pierce, the sheriff. As the crowd surged back down the slope to Saguero Bend, Hashknife asked the two men regard-

ing the deaths of Len Forrest, Jim Payne and Frank Allen. Both men looked blankly at the tall, gray-eyed cowboy, who led the way to the three graves and pointed out the inscriptions.

"That's sure funny," admitted Uncle Billy. "Why I never thought about the dates. Dave, these—why, Henry Bradley was killed on that same date!"

"Four men—all picked August thirteenth," said the sheriff.

"I helped bury 'em," said Uncle Billy. "Fact is, I pall-beared for every one of 'em. But that date—huh! Must be a coincidence, Hashknife."

"Two would be a coincidence," said Hashknife quietly, "but four looks like a habit."

"Len Forrest," said Uncle Billy, "was killed by a horse, which kicked him in the head. At least, that was the verdict. Jim Payne suicided himself, and Frank Allen was killed by a horse-thief. By doggies, I don't know why they all picked that date."

"Not only that," said Hashknife, "but they are just one year apart."

"That's right," said the sheriff quietly. "It's just a year ago today that we buried Len Forrest."

"Are yuh sure that Len Forrest was killed by a horse and that Jim Payne killed himself?"

"Why yuh ask that, Hashknife," asked the sheriff. "We must have been pretty sure at the time. I remember we found Jim Payne in a chair at his ranch, his head restin' on the edge of the table. He'd been shot through the heart, and the gun was beside his chair. Shirt burned, too. We found Len Forrest in his own corral, his head bashed in. We figured that a horse had kicked him."

"I believe," said Hashknife, "that Len Forrest had been kicked *on top of his head.*"

UNCLE BILLY and Dave Pierce looked curiously at each other.

"What do you know about it, Hashknife? That happened a year ago," said Pierce.

"A little birdie told me," smiled Hashknife.

"Well, he *was* kicked on top of the head," agreed Uncle Billy. "Len was a pretty good drinker, and we—well, I reckon the coroner's jury figured that he maybe was down, when he was kicked."

"A coroner's jury," said Hashknife quietly, "ain't always a collection of brains."

"If yuh don't mind, I wish you wouldn't talk about this," Hashknife said, as they walked back to town. "It may be just a coincidence that all these men died on the same date—and it may not."

The sheriff laughed. "You don't mean to say that somebody killed these men in that certain date, do yuh, Hashknife?"

"They're all dead—and they died on that date."

"Kinda makes yuh shudder," said Uncle Billy soberly.

"I don't believe it," declared the sheriff. "There's no reason for it, Hashknife."

"If there's no reason, Dave—then it didn't happen."

"Well, is there a reason?"

"I'm a stranger here," reminded Hashknife. "Uncle Billy, you've lived here a long time, and you know everythin' that has happened. Can you figure out any reason for the deaths of these four men?"

"It's ridiculous, Hashknife," smiled the old cattleman. "Nothin' has ever happened to make a man want to kill other men on a certain date."

"Well," sighed Hashknife, "when you ain't got anythin' else to do, Uncle Billy, I wish you'd check back on *everythin'*. There must be an answer to it."

"How far back?" asked Uncle Billy.

"Oh, twenty-five or thirty years, maybe—and then think back to things that happened between now and the date that Jim Payne shot himself. You might remember something."

"I might," said Uncle Billy, "but right now I'm more worried about Peter King. Dave—" He turned to the sheriff. "What did you think about what that preacher said down at the church?"

"A preacher hadn't ort to say things like that," said the sheriff.

"What did he say?" asked Hashknife.

"Well," replied Uncle Billy, "he said that justice was most allus too slow, and that we ort to exact an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He meant that we ort to go out and hang Peter King. Everybody understood it. A funeral ain't no place for talk like that."

THEY found Stan Corbin at the office. He was still wearing bandages on his arm.

He called the sheriff aside and talked confidentially to him for several minutes, before leaving. The sheriff came back to Hashknife and Uncle Billy.

"When a man is down," he said quietly, "they sure pile everythin' on him. Stan says that he's almost sure Pete King was the horse thief that shot him. He remembers now that the man was dressed in black. Just as though Pete King was the only man in the valley to wear black clothes!"

"Who else wears black clothes?" asked Hashknife.

The sheriff hesitated for several moments, scowling thoughtfully. Then he said, "Well, I dunno, Hashknife. Can't think of any right now."

"Does Pete King *always* wear black?"

"I ain't never seen him wearin' anythin' else," said Uncle Billy.

"Not even a colored necktie nor a colored neckerchief," added the sheriff.

"They tell me," remarked Hashknife, "that El Solo always wears black."

The sheriff looked sharply at Hashknife. "You, too, eh?" he said. "Well, I reckon Pete King is facin' worse charges than that."

"I'm not accusin' him," smiled Hashknife, "but is it true about El Solo?"

"I've never seen him," replied the sheriff, "but that kinda describes him."

"Do you think El Solo tried to rob the stage the day we came in here?"

"Not accordin' to Stony Moss' description. He didn't mention black clothes at all. What's this all about, Hashknife?"

"Oh, I dunno, Dave—just askin' questions."

"Why don't you and Sleepy come out to the ranch with me and Ma tonight?" asked Uncle Billy. "There's plenty food—and we can talk. Shucks, I might remember somethin' yuh wanted to know."

"Much obliged," smiled Hashknife. "I'll find Sleepy. He won't care about the talk—but he's a great eater."

The Quarter-Circle M was a homelike place, part adobe, part frame, well kept. Ma Motley loved flowers, and cultivated a huge garden of roses. The front of the house was banked with red geraniums. Colt King was there, with Danny Hoban and Steve Lee, the two punchers.

"Colt's goin' around in a daze," said Uncle Billy sadly. "That's one of the reasons I came to you, Hashknife. I told him I'd bet him a yearlin' heifer against the butt of his next cigarette that you could prove that his dad didn't kill Hank Bradley. You can't do it, of course, but it kinda boosted his feelin's a little. 'Course I lied to him about what you've done. I laid it on plenty thick."

"That's fine," said Hashknife quietly. "What we want to find out is *why* he killed Hank Bradley, Uncle Billy."

"Yeah, I—" The little cattleman squinted at Hashknife, who merely looked soberly down at him. "Why—huh? Why he killed Hank Bradley?"

"Yeah—why, Uncle Billy—since yo're so sure he killed him."

"Me sure? "Why, hell's-bells! Hm-m-m. Mebbe I did kinda talk thataway. Well, what do you think, Hashknife Hartley?"

"All I'm thinkin' about right now, Uncle Billy, is that four men have died on August thirteenth—one year apart."

"Still worryin' about that, eh? Yo're barkin' up the wrong tree. Len Forrest was kicked to death by a horse, Jim Payne killed himself and Frank Allen was shot by horse thieves. You ain't goin' to be stubborn enough to say that one man killed all these men, are yuh?"

"Uncle Billy, do yuh want me to let that idea of mine slide past, and have 'em hang Peter King?"

"Shucks, no! We're pretty sure Pete King killed Hank Bradley, but what was his idea in killin' the other three men?"

"Ma's got supper almost ready!" called Sleepy. "Don't keep me waitin'."

MA MOTLEY was a wonderful cook, and the meal was bountiful, but there was little conversation. Colt King barely touched his food, and asked to be excused. No one blamed him. He saddled his horse and rode away.

"You settled here in early days, didn't yuh, Uncle Billy?" asked Hashknife.

"Me and Ma came here forty-odd years ago, and took up this homestead. We've seen everythin' that's happened in Red Horse Valley since the Injuns moved out.

We wasn't in here very long, until others came in. Jim Payne, Len Forrest, Frank Allen, Hank Bradley. Frank Allen opened our first store, but sold out and went into cows, like the rest of us. Bradley started our first stage line. Jim Payne used to play the fiddle at our dances. We had lots of fun in them days—but there was lots of hard work, too.

"It was pretty tough on them that had children, 'cause we didn't have no school, but one day we got together and built a schoolhouse in Saguero Bend. It was our first schoolhouse, and we was mighty proud of it."

"Until somebody remembered that we didn't have any schoolteacher," laughed Ma Motley.

"Yeah, and that worked up a tough deal," said Uncle Billy. "There was a nester, who moved into an old shack on Jim Payne's spread. He had a little kid, and there was a old rawhider livin' with him. Jim warned him to get off his spread, but the nester was pretty forked. Then somebody heard that the nester was a schoolteacher. I think the old rawhider told somebody. Anyway, me and Hank and Jim and Len got Frank, who was the first chairman of the school board, and we rode out to the nester's shack.

"Well, sir, that was a queer deal. The nester thought we was a posse, comin' out to chase him off the place, and he started shootin'. He downed my horse, and he cut a hunk of meat out of Bradley's shoulder before we got into action and downed him. Didn't kill him right away, but hurt him bad. We took him to town and done what we could for him. But before he died we was able to tell him it was a mistake. And that's how we lost our first teacher."

"You spoke about a kid," said Hashknife, interested in the story.

"Yeah—'bout five, six years old. His father told us where to send him. Down in Injun Territory some'ers. Had some relations down there, I believe."

"He was a little spitfire, too," added Ma Motley. "I tried to give him a bath, and he bit me. I was glad to see him leave."

"What was the name of the nester?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, gosh, that was so long ago—Ma, what was his name?"

"Suman," replied Ma promptly. "I remember that kid's name, too, it was Yancey. Yancey Suman. Queer name; and could he bite!"

"His pa wasn't no downy angel," said Uncle Billy. "Cost us a hundred dollars to send the kid home—and we still didn't have no schoolteacher."

"Uncle Billy, do you remember the date that Suman died?" asked Hashknife soberly.

The little cattleman squinted at Hashknife. "Date? No, I don't remember it. What difference does that make? Nobody'd remember the date."

"Wait a minute!" said Ma Motley. I remember, Billy. Jim Payne had a birthday party the day after Suman died. Don't you remember—everybody was a bit upset over it—over Suman dying? You remember, don't you?"

"By golly, I do remember it, Ma! We just sat around and talked."

"That's right. And Jim Payne's birthday was on August fourteenth."

"Which makes the death of Suman on August thirteenth," said Hashknife.

Uncle Billy looked at Hashknife, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"August thirteenth," he muttered. "It gives me goose-pimples. Danged if it ain't a queer thing. But what's the answer, Hashknife?"

The tall cowboy shook his head slowly. "Four of the five men who killed Suman are dead," he said. "They died on the same date that Suman died. You are number five, Uncle Billy."

THE little cattleman stared at Hashknife, his eyes blinked rapidly for a few moments, as he began to realize what Hashknife had said:

"Why of all the—" He hesitated, laid his knife and fork carefully on the table and shoved his chair back.

"Ma-a-a," he quavered, "give me another helpin' of mulligan, and don't say I'm overeatin'. A condemned man is allus allowed to eat what he wants."

"But you won't git killed for another year," said Sleepy.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Uncle Billy. "This don't work out, Hashknife. Who's doin' the killin'?"

"Yancey Suman."

"Yancey—why, he ain't in this valley. There ain't no—"

"Not under that name, of course, Uncle Billy."

The little cattleman stared at Hashknife, his mind working swiftly.

"Why, it—it could be any danged puncher," he whispered. "He could be anybody. Names don't mean nothin'. Nobody'd know him. He's been here a long time, too—a yearly killer. Why, the damned *lobo!*"

"Billy, do you still want that mulligan?" asked Ma Motley.

"I've done lost my appetite, Ma," whispered Uncle Billy. "Why, darn his knotheaded soul!"

"He's smart," said Hashknife. "He covered 'em all up, except the last one. He killed and put the blame on a kickin' bronc. He killed again and made it look like suicide. Then he killed once more and put the deadwood on horse thieves. But the last time he never had a chance to do a smart job, and had to murder a man. That was bad."

"They was all bad enough," sighed Uncle Billy. "We've done harbored a viper in our bosom—and didn't know it. But, Hashknife, how can we find out who he is? Corbin's got three, four men on the Forked Arrow that have been here a long time. Ace Breen's got two that have been here for five, six years. There's five, six men on the Anchor T that Jim Turner's had for a long time. Or it could be somebody that works at somethin' else. Yuh can't go around and ask 'em if their right name is Yancey Suman."

"Or," added Sleepy, "it could be some feller out of Mexico, who could come up here once a year and do his dirty-work. Or he could come from the North."

"Sleepy," said Uncle Billy soberly, "I could learn to hate you."

"Not half as much as I hate Bob Marsh," said Sleepy. "There's what I call a hateable character. If it hadn't been for him, me and Hashknife would be travelin' north, instead of bein' down here, worryin' about killers."

"You don't need to worry—he don't want to kill you two."

"That," said Hashknife, "is something I'd hate to bet on."

HASHKNIFE had no evidence to support his theory that Yancey Suman killed the four men, but the fact that his father had been killed on that date, and all four men had died on that same day of the month seemed to take it out of the coincidence class. The difficulty would be in finding a man whose right name was Yancey Suman.

The next morning, about an hour before the stage was due to leave for the north, Hashknife and Sleepy walked up to the postoffice with Happy McGee. Ace Breen was behind the partition of the little postoffice, talking with the elderly postmaster, who was putting some sealing-wax on a parcel. Breen came out, tucking a receipt in his pocket, spoke to the three men and walked out. Happy bought some stamps for the office and they walked back. Dave Pierce, the sheriff, had just reached the office and Hashknife drew him aside.

"What's on yore mind?" asked the sheriff.

"Just a long-shot," smiled Hashknife. "How would you like to get El Solo?"

The sheriff looked curiously at Hashknife. "El Solo? You mean—get him?"

"Yea-a-ah—maybe—if you'd take the chance, Dave."

"I hope to tell yuh," said the sheriff earnestly. "But how?"

"Ride out ahead of the stage, flag Stony Moss out there a couple miles, and ride inside the stage. I figure El Solo is due."

"Wait a minute, Hashknife; where'd you get this information?"

"It's just a hunch, Dave; take it or leave it. Maybe it's a bad hunch."

The sheriff squinted thoughtfully at the tall, gray-eyed cowboy for several moments.

"Yea-a-ah," he breathed. "I'll take it, Hashknife—thank yuh."

The sheriff hurried away to his stable, and a few minutes later he rode out of town, heading north, wondering where Hashknife got his information that El Solo might attempt to hold up the stage. He flagged the stage, told Smoky Moss he'd ride inside, and closed the door.

Smoky spat over the wheel, opined that everybody in Red Horse Valley was loco—so why not the sheriff, too—and drove on. They headed into the winding grades,

climbing all the time, clouds of dust drifting up from the grinding wheels.

ON a hairpin turn, not far from where Stony had been held up the day Hashknife and Sleepy came into the valley, a lone bandit, masked and clad in black, caused the lead team to swerve into the inside bank, and Stony obligingly socked on the brake, dropping the lines between his knees and lifting his hands.

"Throw down the mail sack!" snarled the bandit. "Hurry, you damn snail!"

"Gimme time, will you?" complained Stony, as he reached back.

"Drop that gun!" snapped Dave Pierce's voice, as he flung the stage door open.

The masked bandit whirled, refusing to drop the gun, and Pierce fired. The heavy bullet smashed into the cylinder of the bandit's gun, paralyzing his hand. He was staggering sideways, trying to pick up the gun with his left hand, when the sheriff was into him, knocking him flat.

Stony Moss stared down from his high seat on the stage and said, "Callin' me a damn snail! Serves him right."

The sheriff ripped the mask off the face of the bandit, and got slowly to his feet.

"Smoky Woods!" said Stony.

"Yea-a-ah!" snorted the sheriff. "Stony, we've got El Solo. Help me load him into the stage."

They handcuffed him to the seat, as he was regaining consciousness, and watched him begin to realize what had happened to him. He looked at his locked wrists, stared at Dave Pierce and Stony Moss, shut his lean jaws tightly and leaned back in the seat. Smoky Woods wasn't talking.

They took him back to Saguero Bend, questioned him for thirty minutes, and threw him into jail, but he never spoke a word. Ace Breen came over to the office and talked with the sheriff. Smoky worked for Breen on the Five Dot spread.

"I can't quite believe it, Dave," said Breen. "Smoky has always been a fine worker, and I never suspected him of anythin' like this."

"I guess yuh never can tell, Ace," sighed the sheriff. "I got him cold, and Stony can witness it. Smoky won't be punchin' cows for a long time."

"Stony was tellin' it over in the Ocotillo. He said you must have known it was goin' to happen."

"That was kinda funny, Ace," remarked the sheriff. "Hashknife Hartley told me to do it that way. He said El Solo was due. I took his word for it—and see what happened. How he knew—I don't know. Maybe he's a mind-reader."

"That's a funny deal," said Ace Breen quietly. "He told you to ride out on the stage? But how could he know that El Solo was goin' to stick up the stage. Mind-reader! I don't believe in that sort of stuff."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Ace—but he sure hit the nail on the head."

The gambler went back to the saloon, as Hashknife and Sleepy sauntered down to the office. The sheriff squinted at Hashknife, who grinned widely.

"Good guessin', eh?" said Hashknife.

"You didn't *guess* that, Hashknife," said the sheriff.

"Maybe a little bird told me, eh?"

"You ain't a mind-reader, are yuh, Hashknife?"

"If I was," smiled Hashknife, "I'd go where there's better readin' than you'll find in a cow-town, Dave. What did yore prisoner tell yuh?"

"He refused to say a word."

"What did Breen think about his hired man?"

"What could he think, Hashknife? He said that he always considered Smoky a good cow-hand."

"I saw yuh take him off the stage," said Hashknife. "He looked shaky."

"His future," smiled the sheriff, "ain't too darned bright."

"And that suit of black clothes don't fit him," added Happy. "Made me think of that damn suit I wore to the weddin'. They're two sizes too big for him. Shucks, I always liked Smoky. But I reckon yuh never can tell."

"Right now," said the sheriff seriously, "I'd like to know how you knew he was goin' to stick up that stage, Hashknife."

"As simple as anythin', Dave," smiled Hashknife. "He must have known that Ace Breen was sendin' a package of money out to the bank—and he wanted the money. That was his second try for that money.

I knew Breen was sendin' money out on the stage; so I played my hunch. Simple, eh?"

"Yea-a-a-ah! Gosh, it sure was a good hunch—and I'm much obliged. Do somethin' for you some time—I hope. I must tell Ace Breen how yuh saved his money. I'll bet he'll be grateful, too."

"I imagine he will."

"If Smoky decides to talk, I'll let yuh know what he says."

"I don't think he will," said Hashknife.

Dunc McBride, Smoky's bunkie, came in, glowering at the sheriff. Dunc was a rough, cowboy who needed a haircut and a shave.

"I heard you've got Smoky in here, Pierce. Made a mistake, ain't yuh?" he growled.

"Not yet, Dunc. He tried to stick up the stage."

"I don't believe it! Smoky wouldn't do that."

"I happened to be in the stage, Dunc—and I got him in his black mask."

"That's kinda hard to believe, Pierce. Mind lettin' me talk with him?"

"He won't talk, Dunc—and when he gets ready to talk, I'll be the first one to talk with him."

"Kinda high-handed, ain't you?" snarled Dunc.

"I happen to be the sheriff—and don't forget that, my friend."

Dunc McBride turned on his heel and walked out.

"Kinda forked," remarked Sleepy.

"Smoky is his bunkie," reminded Happy. "You'll have to excuse him."

"And keep yore powder dry," chuckled Sleepy. "If Smoky Wood is El Solo, and he's a bunkie to Dunc McBride—I wouldn't trust McBride."

"That sounds like common sense," agreed Happy.

Colt King came in. He had heard about the arrest of Smoky Wood, and that seemed to offer him a crumb of comfort.

"I know the talk that's been going around—about my father bein' El Solo," he said. "Well, this kinda changes that crazy idea. Dave, can I go in and talk with Dad?"

"Well, yea-a-ah, I reckon so. Mebbe I better go with yuh, Colt; I don't want yuh to talk with Smoky Wood."

"I heard that he won't talk."

"Well, he won't talk to me," smiled the sheriff, "and I ain't takin' no chances on that *pelicano* talkin' to anybody else."

IT WAS the first time Colt King had come to see his father, and Hashknife was curious to know what was said. They came from the jail fifteen minutes later, and Colt King rode away. Hashknife asked if Smoky did any talking.

"No, but he done a lot of listenin', replied the sheriff. "Colt told his father that —well, he told him that you had been hired to prove that he didn't kill Hank Bradley. That was news to me, Hashknife."

"It does seem a little newsy," admitted Hashknife soberly.

The four men sat in the little office, each waiting for the other to start conversation. Finally the sheriff said:

"It would be quite a job, I reckon. Everybody is satisfied that Pete King done the shootin'."

"Some folks satisfy awful easy, Dave," said Hashknife quietly.

Uncle Billy Motley came to the office with Stephen Auld, the prosecuting attorney, and the sheriff told them about the capture of Smoky Wood. The elderly lawyer was jubilant over the prospect of having El Solo in the hands of the law, and shook hands with the sheriff over the capture.

"Good work!" he exclaimed. "Very, very good." He turned to Hashknife.

"Mr. Motley has been telling me about you, sir," he said. "Would it be convenient to come with me to my office? I have a few things to discuss in private."

It seems that Uncle Billy had told the lawyer about the fatal date of August thirteenth, and the lawyer was curious for Hashknife's opinion.

"Mr. Motley," stated Ault, "says that you attribute all these deaths to one man; that there is a sinister killer abroad in Red Horse Valley year by year, avenging the death of a man who was killed by an unfortunate accident."

"Can you figure out a better answer?" asked Hashknife.

"After all, the death of this man, Suman, was an accident."

"It was a mistake, not an accident," corrected Hashknife. "There's a big difference, Mr. Auld."

"Yes, that is true. But your theory is a little far-fetched, I'm afraid."

"I wonder if it is," said Hashknife quietly.

The attorney's office was on the ground floor of the ramshackle building used as a courthouse, with one big window fronting out on the main street. The lawyer sat at his desk, his back to the window, and Hashknife sat across the desk, facing him. Across from them was some vacant buildings, badly in need of repair. There was little activity on the main street. Sleepy and Happy came past, heading for the post-office, and looked curiously into the office.

"After all," said the lawyer, "the most interested person would be, or have been, the son of this Suman. He was too young to know much about it. No, I feel that the whole thing is a coincidence, Mr. Hartley. A man, to do things like you attribute to this man, must be insane."

"I didn't say he wasn't loco," said Hashknife soberly.

"If your theory was right, he was smart enough to conceal murder in three of the four cases."

"After all," smiled Hashknife, "there's no use of us arguin', Mr. Auld. We both have a right to our opinion."

"No, we won't argue. I'm satisfied to have Peter King as the murderer of Henry Bradley. You go ahead and hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"Thank you, Mr. Auld. Well, I'll be goin'."

Both men got to their feet. The lawyer held out his hand, but before their hands could meet, a bullet shattered the big front window. Stephen Auld grunted softly, sagged forward and sprawled across his desk. From somewhere came the snap report of a rifle shot.

HASHKNIFE'S eyes flashed to the hole in the window. The shot had come from the old buildings across the street. He sprang to the door, flung it open and went running across the street, gun in hand.

"Stop him! He's shot somebody!" a voice yelled.

Hashknife raced around the building, but was unable to see anyone. People were milling in the street, trying to find what it was all about. The sheriff ran around to meet Hashknife, who told him to get a doctor for Auld.

"Somebody shot him through the window," Hashknife told him. "The shot came from over here."

Sleepy and Happy reached there, and the sheriff sent Happy for the doctor, while he and Hashknife ran back to the lawyer's office. There was no need for the doctor—Auld was dead. Hashknife examined the window, which was rather heavy plate glass, and from a front window, from which the glass had been removed, the hole in the window was directly in line with where he had sat. Evidently the bullet had deflected in the glass, and turned just enough to hit the lawyer. Possibly a soft-point bullet.

THE townspeople crowded around the office, clamoring for information, which no one could give them. Several men helped the doctor remove the body. Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel, where Hashknife told Sleepy that he was positive the bullet had been meant for him.

"Now we've got our noses wet," complained Sleepy. "There's been too darned much talk about us bein' detectives and all that. After lookin' at that graveyard out there on the hill, I don't want to stay here. It's an awful bleak place to be planted."

"That heavy glass deflected the bullet," said Hashknife. "There's no reason for anybody to kill the lawyer."

"This town will be up in arms," declared Sleepy. "Uncle Billy says the cattlemen are holdin' a meetin' at the Forked Arrow tonight. He don't know what it's all about, but he thinks it's about Pete King. They don't think the law will hang him for killin' Bradley; so they're goin' to get together and sharpen up a rope. Uncle Billy said he'd tell us what was said and done."

"What else did Uncle Billy say?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, not much more. He said he couldn't find anybody that believed that them other three men was murdered."

"Uncle Billy," said Hashknife soberly, "is goin' to get us killed off before we can prove it."

"Right now," sighed Sleepy, "I ain't got a slippery spot on my whole body, I'm so covered with goose-pimples. Some day, if me and you don't settle down, I'll have to

grease m'self in order to get m' clothes off."

UNCLE BILLY was in town early next morning, and came up to the room, before Hashknife and Sleepy were up. He had gone to the meeting at the Forked Arrow, and had been refused admission. He was boiling with indignation.

"I tell yuh, they're plannin' to lynch Pete King," he declared. "They know I'd block anythin' like that; so they wouldn't let me know their plans. Now that the prosecutor is killed, they know nothin' can be done until a new prosecutor is able to study the case."

"Anybody out there, except cattlemen," asked Hashknife.

"Certainly. Several from town, includin' Ace Breen. He has to have his nose in everythin', 'cause he owns a cow-spread."

"He's a cow-man," smiled Sleepy.

"Yeah!" snorted Uncle Billy. "And Stan Corbin is goin' around, sayin' that he's sure Peter King was the horse thief that shot him. I don't like it."

"Well," said Hashknife, pulling on his boots, "they can't blame King for the killin' of Auld. Peter King may be a killer, but he ain't the only one in Red Horse Valley that pulls a dirty trigger, Uncle Billy."

Word of Auld's murder circulated swiftly through the valley, and by noon the hitch-racks were nearly filled with horse-drawn vehicles and saddle horses. Men examined the broken window and searched the vacant houses across the street from the lawyer's office. Auld had been very popular; so popular, in fact, that no one had ever competed against him for the office of county prosecutor.

Men and women crowded the room where the inquest was held. Hashknife was the only witness, except that the coroner, Dr. Post, testified to the cause of death, which was a thirty-five, soft-nose bullet. Hashknife told what he had seen; that he and Auld were in the act of shaking hands when the shot was fired, and that he ran immediately over to the vacant houses seeking the killer. The six-man jury brought in the only possible verdict—death caused by a party unknown.

Strangely enough, following the inquest, all the cattlemen and cowboys drifted out of town. It was not like them to do a thing like that. They usually made a day out of any excuse to come to town, but this time they rode away. Hashknife mentioned it to Dave Pierce, who saw no significance in it.

The town was quiet all day. Hashknife and Sleepy, together with Happy McGee, lounged in the shade of the hotel porch, wondering what might happen next in Red Horse Valley. Colt King came in and talked with the sheriff. He was worried over that meeting last night at the Forked Arrow, at which they denied admission to Uncle Billy Motley.

LATE in the afternoon Hashknife talked with the sheriff about Peter King.

"They won't do anythin'," said the sheriff. "They're bluffin'."

"If they do—it's too late, Dave," said Hashknife. "That jail won't stand an assault, and you know it. Let's take King out of there and hide him—just for tonight."

But the sheriff was stubborn. "If I take him out, and he should get away, they'd say I turned him loose. No, Hashknife, I don't figure they'll do anythin'—and he'll be safe in there; safer than he would be outside."

Hashknife shrugged his shoulders. He had suggested what he thought was best for everyone concerned, but the sheriff didn't agree. All he could do now was wait and see what happened. He and Sleepy ate their supper at the little cafe in the hotel, and went over to the Ocotillo. Only a handful of customers were in there. Happy came in and he and Sleepy started a pool game. Hashknife went back to the hotel and sat down on the porch in the darkness. From there he could watch the hitch-racks along the street. Something told him that trouble was in the air, but he didn't know just what it might be.

Ten o'clock came, but the street was still deserted. He saw Sleepy and Happy leave the Ocotillo and go down to the sheriff's office. Finally he got up and went into the hotel, heading for his room to get a package of tobacco.

Old Mike Moran, nodding over a dog-eared novel, looked up.

"The city is quiet tonight," he remarked, "and it should be, with one of its finest men lying cold in death. And he died w'ile shakin' hands with you, Mr. Har-rtley. My, my, it is awful, sir! Are ye hitting the hay, if I may ask?"

"I'm goin' up after some tobacco, Mr. Moran."

"Oh, I'd offer ye some of mine, but it's cut off the old plug, and I'm afraid it'd poke holes in the bit o' paper ye use."

"Yeah, I'm afraid it would," smiled Hashknife, and went up the stairs.

He rolled a cigarette, turned out the light and sat at the open window, which looked out on the main street. From that vantage point he could see most of the street, and it was more comfortable up there than on the hard porch chair. After another hour he wondered what had become of Sleepy and Happy. He couldn't see the sheriff's office from the window.

Then he saw a man standing near the corner of the Ocotillo, between the saloon and the hitch-rack. He was in the shadow, and Hashknife had no idea how long he had been there. Perhaps he was watching the hotel.

Hashknife left his room and went down to the little lobby. There was a door near the little counter, and Hashknife found that it led to the back of the place. He circled the hotel and some other buildings to the alley beside the sheriff's office.

The door of the office was locked, and no light was showing. Hashknife was sure that Sleepy and Happy did not come back up the street. Down the street, and across was the big livery-stable, but beyond that was only open country. Slowly and carefully he circled the office and jail. He stopped at a rear corner and listened carefully.

There was a scraping noise, but he wasn't able to locate it at once. Then he heard it again. It was at the rear of the jail, deep in the heavy shadow. Crouched low, his hands searching in front of him, he began moving along the wall. About fifteen feet from the corner his hands touched a boot-heel.

Someone was under the jail! And that someone was snaking out backwards. Hashknife waited, poised over the man, who was swearing under his breath, as he twisted and squirmed free of the low foundation. Then he felt the man's shoulders lift, as he came free.

Hashknife couldn't see the man; so he dropped on him, reaching for his throat. The man yelped a curse and became a volcano of kicking feet and flailing arms. Locked together they rolled away from the wall, the man doing most of the fighting, while Hashknife tried to lock his arms. But that was no use. The man was as powerful as a grizzly. He dazed Hashknife with a wild blow to the chin, but the tall cowboy drove his head into the man's body, encircled him with two powerful arms, swung the man off the ground and dived into the jail wall with him.

The man's head came in contact with the brick wall, and he went as limp as an empty sack. Panting heavily from the battle Hashknife cautiously lighted a match. The man was Dunc McBride, bloody and dirt-streaked. Extending from the hole under the jail was a short length of blasting fuse, the end split.

Hashknife gave it a steady, strong pull, and out came about four feet of the fuse, with a detonator clamped to the end. He felt it over in the dark, removed the detonator, and proceeded to tie Dunc McBride with the fuse. When he slipped away from the back of the jail, McBride was hog-tied in a sitting position, his wrists against his ankles. Not a comfortable position, but suitable for a dynamiter.

HASHKNIFE realized that had he been a few minutes later, both prisoners would have been blown up with the jail. There was a faint light showing through the crack between the huge sliding doors of the livery-stable. Except for the lights in the Ocotillo, the rest of the town was in darkness.

He went swiftly across the street in the darkness and cautiously came up to the front of the stable. There was a ramp, leading up to the doors. There were low-pitched voices inside the stable, as Hashknife came up close, where he could peer through a crack.

One stable-lantern hung on a peg from a center post, casting an eerie light over the assemblage. There were at least twenty masked men in there, watching two men knot a rope.

"What are we waitin' for, anyway?" one man said nervously.

"Don't get in a hurry," said one of the men with the rope. "We set a time to do this job—let's stick to it. Both roads are blocked, and the law is in our hands. This will be the slickest job of this kind ever pulled; so let's not go off half-cocked."

"I don't like it," said one of the men. "It's all right to talk about takin' the law

in our hands—but when yuh come right down to it—"

"Stay out of it then!" snapped the man with the rope. "If you're chicken-hearted—stay here."

Hashknife recognized that voice—it was Ace Breen, the gambler. Someone else said something, and Breen replied:

"We'll just show the world that there's law in Red Horse Valley."

"Or there damn well ain't," remarked another sarcastically.

Hashknife saw Breen get to his feet. He was bigger than the rest of them. He flung the rope aside and said:

"All right, men—do we or don't we? If we're going to do it, let's do it without whining. Pete King killed Henry Bradley—we've agreed to that. If you're too damn yellow to go ahead with the job as we planned—"

No one spoke, until someone said quietly, "What about that Hartley—we ain't got him safe."

"One man!" sneered Breen. "He's in the hotel, and they're watchin' the hotel. What are you scared of, anyway?"

The door slid open and Hashknife Hartley stepped into the stable. He was only a dim figure, that far from the lantern, but they recognized him.

"You're scared of me, Breen," he said quietly.

The crowd didn't move. Every masked man held his position so solidly that they looked like a group of wax-works, as Hashknife came slowly ahead. He was without his hat, and there were streaks of dirt and blood across his lean face. Hashknife's voice was pitched low, but lashed like a whip, as he said to them.

"Men, while you followed the lead of this rabies-streaked lobo, his henchman planted a load of dynamite under the jail. There wasn't goin' to be any lynchin' tonight; he was waitin' for the blast that would kill Pete King and Smoky Wood. He was afraid Smoky might talk."

No one moved nor spoke. Ace Breen was several feet away from the nearest masked man, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, as he hunched, staring at this accusing figure. Hashknife's voice broke the stillness again.

"Yuh see, folks, this man, Yancey Suman, came here and—"

"Damn you, Hartley!" screamed Ace Breen. "You dirty—"

He tried to pull his gun, but it was out of position, his foot caught in the loop of the rope, and he went to his knees, clawing his gun loose. Hashknife fired once, his .45 blasting loudly in the big room.

IT KNOCKED the gambler backwards and he fell against the post, his right shoulder smashed. Someone kicked the gun aside. The gambler was half-crying, half-screaming imprecations at Hashknife, but unable to move.

"Take off those damn masks!" snapped Hashknife. "The masquerade is over. This man is the killer of four of your best citizens—and you were goin' to help him kill another. This man, Ace Breen, if you like the name, killed Henry Bradley. He killed Jim Payne, Frank Allen and Len Forrest. And between times he was El Solo."

The men, ashamed to look at each other, were taking off their masks. One of them said, "I'll get the doctor!" and went running out.

"Where's my pardner and the two officers?" asked Hashknife.

"Tied up and locked in a cell," replied a man huskily. "My God—we almost done it!"

Hashknife looked down at Ace Breen, who glared like a trapped wolf.

"So you was goin' to make a clean sweep, eh, Yancey Suman?" he said.

"Why not?" said the gambler huskily. "I should have got you first, damn yuh."

"You made a lot of mistakes," said Hashknife. "When you found that you could put the deadwood on Pete King, you went to his place, found his gun, fired one shell, and then went plumb out to the Lazy B and planted the gun in that rose-bush. I suggested it, if you remember."

"Damn your nosey soul, if I ever—"

"But you won't, my friend," said Hashknife. "You're through. You'll never send money by stage again, and try to steal it back, and also collect the insurance on it."

"How did you know I—I was—Yancey—Suman?" he asked weakly.

"I didn't *know*—I just guessed," replied Hashknife.

"Damned if he ain't passed out!" grunted one of the men.

They found Sleepy, Dave Pierce and Happy McGee all tied up and gagged in the extra cell. They were quickly told what had happened. Peter King and Smoky Wood heard everything that was said.

"I'll talk now—what do yuh want to know?" said Smoky. "Ace tried to murder me; so I'm free to talk. Dunc shot at Hartley and killed Steve Auld."

"Hashknife told it all, Smoky," said one of the men. "You knew Breen was Yancey Suman, didn't yuh?"

"I shore did. Damn him, he made me play El Solo for him, but it didn't work."

"How did you know Smoky wasn't the genuine El Solo, Hashknife?" asked Pierce.

"Nobody," replied Hashknife, "except a best-man would wear a suit that fitted that badly, Dave."

"Rub it in," said Happy. "Oh, m' Gawd! Pete King is exonerated, and—and they'll hold that marriage again! Look! Here's Colt King and Uncle Billy!"

The two men shoved through the crowd, and the sheriff quickly sketched what had happened. They brought Dunc McBride into the office. He was still dazed from bumping his head against the wall. They unfastened the fuse from his arms and legs, and dumped him into a cell beside Smoky.

"There's the *pelicano* that tried to murder yuh, Smoky," said Happy.

"Lemme have a gun—jist for a moment," begged Smoky. "Jist one shot."

They didn't wait for any action of the law, but released Peter King at once. The men all shook hands with him, their faces tense, as they realized what they had intended to do to him. Peter King shook hands with Hashknife, but said nothing. Colt King shook hands with Hashknife, too, but was unable to say anything either. Not so, Uncle Billy Motley. He was explosive.

"Bob Marsh told me!" he yelped. "He told me plenty. Dang him, I'll tell him somethin' now! Whooee-e-e-e-e! High-Pockets, I told yuh I'd pay yuh anythin' yuh asked. Tell me what yuh want, and it's yours."

Uncle Billy looked around defiantly at everyone, but there was no sign of Hashknife nor Sleepy.

"Well, where the hell did they go?" demanded the little cow-man. "They was here a minute ago."

THEY were fully paid-up at the hotel. No one saw them carry their warbags down to the livery-stable. The lantern was still lighted, and the discarded rope, with its hangman's noose, was still on the floor, the loop soggy with blood from the man who built it.

They quietly saddled their horses and rode out of Saguero Bend. It was a bit lighter now, as they hit the winding road toward Red Rock. Sleepy said:

"Them fellers sure took me and Happy and Dave, like Grant took Richmond. Tall Feller, I'm glad yo're nosey. Suppose yuh hadn't heard McBride settin' his blast?"

"The Big Book didn't mention dynamite, pardner," replied Hashknife.

And they rode away, knee-to-knee, bridle-chains jingling, and only the soft plop of hoofs to show that they were heading for a tall hill again.

The U. S. Postal Service Can Also Be Interested in Ration Points

BETTER THAN DIAMONDS

By RAY MILLHOLLAND

WITH his rod case under his arm and his hand bag and canvas duffel bag containing his waterproof wading pants and fishing clothes on the baggage truck beside him, Inspector Ferguson, retired, of the U. S. Postal Inspection Service watched the train pull away from the station and vanish around the curve. He listened to it rumble over the creosoted timber trestle over Rapid River, one of the finest trout streams a man could hope to find in one short lifetime of seventy-odd years, and heaved a big sigh of contentment. It was the tag end of May and the morning sun was bright, and up there on the ridge stood the same tall spindle of a Norway pine, still the same reliable landmark it had been for thirty years back that Inspector Ferguson had been coming to Rapid River for his annual two weeks' trout fishing. He had missed last year and the year before, but that was because the Postal Inspection Service had been short-handed and had called him back out of retirement. He would have missed this year, too—there was a lot more interference going on with the mails than was getting into the papers—but for the fact that Carrigan the district chief had a hunch a good man could pick up some interesting information, up there in the sparsely settled Rapid River country, if he knew his way around and could get the local citizens to give out with a little gossip.

Inspector Ferguson tucked his rod case well up under his arm, picked up his hand bag with his left hand and then with a deceptively easy flip of his thin wrist shouldered his duffel bag for a mile-long walk to Dan Coleman's trout fishing camp. There was something better than six feet and an

inch of the inspector under that comfortably soft old felt hat he was wearing, and his stride was the long stride of a man for whom physical exertion is not uncomfortable.

As he passed the one dilapidated store of this tiny way-station village a dumpy figure in a much darned sweater jacket with a roll collar popped out of the door and yelled, "Inspector, what the dickens you up to? Dump your plunder where you are and come in and set till I hitch up and drive you out to Dan's."

There was a quizzical, almost speculative, interest in Inspector Ferguson's clear gray eyes as he watched Curt Stoggins the storekeeper snap a formidably large padlock on his front door and give it a hard tug, as if to make certain it was properly locked.

"Since when did people up in this country start locking their doors before they turn their backs on them?" inquired Inspector Ferguson, lowering his duffel bag to the ground in anticipation of a profitable five-minute chat.

Curt Stoggins tipped back his head to look his interrogator in the eye.

"If you'd come up last Spring and the one before that, you wouldn't be asking."

"Have you been missing stuff from your store?"

"Regular," avowed Curt with a choppy nod. "Always stuff with ration points on it, too."

"M'n'n—" Inspector Ferguson fished his pipe from his coat pocket and fired up deliberately. Big hauls or little ones, Curt?"

"Not big ones for a city storekeeper to lose, I don't suppose," said Curt, untying the reins of a sleepy-eyed buckskin pony hitched to the rail in front of the store. "Toss your plunder in back and I'll tell you about it on the way to Dan's."

Inspector Ferguson heaved his duffel bag into the bed of a light wagon, tucked his precious rod case under the front seat and climbed aboard, to rest his hand bag on his bony knees.

" . . . I figure whoever is doing it is eating what they take," Curt Stoggins was observing as they turned off the main road onto the sand trail leading to Dan Coleman's. "Figure maybe I'm feeding two—three people who either don't have ration books or else don't want to show 'em in these parts."

Just before they reached Dan's clearing, Curt pulled up and said, guardedly, "Here's something special you ought to know. Bob Allison is back from the Marines. Been through some hellish fighting and got himself a hatful of medals. I mean, he's home for good. He is staying with Dan."

There was even more news in Curt's look than in his words. He clamped his lips and prepared to drive on when Inspector Ferguson laid a hand on his sleeve.

"How is the boy—badly shot up?"

"You'll see the minute you look at him," was Curt's terse answer. "But don't let him catch you noticing what that bomb splinter did to the left side of his face. And another thing, don't mention Lottie Dale when he can hear you."

Inspector Ferguson's ordinarily charitable eyes grew stern.

"You mean she threw him over for some other fellow?"

"I didn't say." Curt clucked to his pony and drove on, then relented to the extent of adding, "She fainted dead away, first time she saw him back. He never give her the chance of a second look."

THE journey continued in somber silence. Inspector Ferguson thinking back over the years and recalling the alert, sun-browned youngster Bob Allison had been, who knew every good stretch of trout water in the county and just what fly was best for each spot at any hour of the day—and thinking, too, about Lottie Dale who had filled in as postmistress at Bear Lake while her brother was in the Marines.

Curt's pony had barely come to a stop under the two big pines in Dan Coleman's front door yard when Dan himself came striding into the clearing from the other side of the kitchen garden. Dan, for all his years, was wearing the forest green of a state conservation officer.

"By gollies," he shouted, "I began thinking about you all day, Inspector. Sure good to lay eyes on you again," he said, pumping Inspector Ferguson's hand with the grip of a wolf trap. "You old varmint, you, I kept waiting all last Spring and the Spring before for you to show up. Come on, pile out and we'll boil the coffee. You, too, Curt. That store of yours won't get up on its hind legs and walk off."

"Nope, I got to skedaddle back," said Curt, clucking to his pony and was off.

Inspector Ferguson ran an eye over the trim uniform of his host as he passed over a cigar. Dan's face was brown as old leather and the crow's feet around his eyes were etched even more deeply than they had been two years ago, but he stood straight as a surveyor's staff in his high laced boots and tightly buttoned tunic. The heavy revolver in the holster on Dan's hip caused one of Inspector Ferguson's bushy eyebrows to twitch.

"Any use for that thing up here, Dan?"

"Couple of times, I thought I was going to need it," admitted Dan, utterly devoid of bravado. "They were German prisoners that had escaped from camps across the line in Canada. Just hungry, scared kids. Made me mad as the dickens when the papers played 'em up as bloodthirsty animals I'd captured at the risk of my life. Heck, one of 'em was sitting right down there by the river, wrapping his shirt around a pair of the worst cut-up feet I ever saw on a boy."

With an inquiring look toward the cabin, Inspector Ferguson said, "Anybody else come up this Spring yet?"

"Nobody around but Bob Allison." Dan bit off the end of the cigar Inspector Ferguson had just given him and jerked his head toward the back yard. "Seen his legs sticking out from under my old Model A. Tinkering with the running gear, I suppose."

He gave his guest a quiet glance. "While I'm bringing in your turkey, why don't you go around back and say hello. But don't ask him to come out from under, 'less he offers to."

Inspector Ferguson nodded. "I understand, Dan."

Dan's eyes narrowed. "Curt told you?"

"Not as much as I'd like to know, Dan. You know how much I think of those two young people."

Dan looked at the end of his cigar. "Did Curt put a name to anybody he thought was swiping stuff from his store?"

"He clammed up before he got that far." Inspector Ferguson was not a man to beat around the bush to avoid an unpleasant issue. "Does Curt think Bob has come home, after what he's done, to turn petty thief?"

"Nobody knows what Curt thinks till he gets good and ready to spit it out," said Dan, shortly. "But sooner or later he's going to pick it up from somebody what Herb Keeler, the barber over to Bear Lake, has been gabbing about. Herb claimed last time he was night fishing at Rikker's Dam he drove past Curt's store about eleven and seen somebody with a limp, duck into the alder thicket just up the road apiece from the store. That was the night Curt lost a whole ham and thirty-six more points of canned stuff."

"I'll go around and say hello to Bob," said Inspector Ferguson and left Dan to exercise his jealously guarded prerogative as host to carry the duffel inside.

HE FOUND a pair of denim clad legs sticking out from under Dan's Model A. The leg of one showed bare between the top of a freshly half-soled army marching shoe and just below the knee cap. There was the red cicatrice of a recently healed wound in the calf of that leg.

Then from under the Model A, "Howdy, Inspector?"

"Recognize the old flat-foot's shoes, eh?" chuckled Inspector Ferguson, but not bending down to look under the car.

"Nope, I just heard Dan giving you the high sign when Curt drove you in. Knew it wasn't Curt he was spreading the welcome mat for."

"M'n'n—sound like Curt has been skunking him at checkers again," hazarded Inspector Ferguson, more to keep the conversation alive than anything else.

"You'll have to ask Dan." Bob Allison went on with his tinkering under the car and made no move to come out.

A brown hand reached out and fumbled in the grass for a wrench. Inspector Ferguson could see a pale band of skin on the wrist and said, "I often wondered, Bob, was that watch really waterproof?"

"Waterproof, and then some—" Before he realized what he was doing, Bob Allison scooted out from under the car and was digging in his shirt pocket. He produced a stainless steel-cased watch and pressed an admiring finger on its plastic crystal. "Six other guys and I wouldn't be alive today if a three-hour dunking had stopped this ticker you gave me for a high-

school graduation present, Inspector. Yeah,—"

Bob stopped short and stared into Inspector Ferguson's eyes, a hard, challenging stare. "Makes you sick to look at it, doesn't it?"

"You mean that scar on your face?" said Inspector Ferguson evenly.

"Yeah."

"If you ask me, Bob, I think that scar is a fake."

"A fake?" Bob's eyes blazed with the deadly anger of a man closing with a bayoneted rifle upon the enemy's trenches. "Sure; I suppose I blew half of my face off because I was yellow and wanted a quick out from the army?"

Inspector Ferguson said quietly, "I'd feel better if you'd drop that wrench in your hand, Bob. I'm too old and slow with my hands to stand much of a chance of disarming a tough customer like you."

Bob Allison tossed the wrench at Inspector Ferguson's feet, then lifted his eyes still aglitter with deadly resentment.

"Still sore because I said that scar is a fake?" probed Inspector Ferguson in that same coldly taunting way of his that impelled more than one barricaded criminal to come out cursing and shooting, wildly —too wildly for his own good. "That's a fake scar, son—"

And it worked again. With the snarl of a wild beast, the younger man sprang for his throat, to throttle the taunt before it could be repeated again. There was a flash of metal and a double clicking sound.

The next moment Bob Allison was staring in blank amazement at the handcuffs on his wrists which had him, with one arm through the open window of Dan's Model A, in such a manner that he would have had to tear the whole side out of the car to free himself.

"Don't feel too badly about it," said Inspector Ferguson, picking up his hat and putting it back on. "I've been practicing that stunt for going on forty years now."

Bob Allison returned a sullenly defiant stare. "I bet you couldn't pull that on me again, Inspector."

"Oh, I don't know." Inspector Ferguson took out his pipe and gave his undivided attention to filling it. "You might," he suggested offhandedly without looking up, "try shaking those things off, son. Just unclinch your fists—"

Slowly, with an ever-widening grin, Bob Allison unclinched his fists and withdrew his hands from the loosely-closed handcuffs. He handed them back to Inspector Ferguson.

"Six months a sergeant of the Marines with Carlson's Raiders and a guy with wrists like match sticks does this to me. But for crying out loud, Inspector, don't tell the old gang! I'd never live it down."

"Now you aren't faking with that scar," said Inspector Ferguson quietly. "Hold that grin, son, and take a look at yourself in the rear-view mirror of Dan's car. Hurry before it fades."

BOB ALLISON opened the car door and slid back of the wheel. He thrust his face close to the mirror and stared intently at his image. He turned his head in disgust.

"No dice," he said, and got out of the car again. Without another word he strode off toward the thick stand of cedars along the bank of Rapid River.

Inspector Ferguson watched him go for a long moment, then turned and went into the cabin.

Dan Coleman was filling three white mugs with steaming coffee. He waved to the table set for three and said, "Stick your head out and tell Bob to come in to lunch."

"He's gone into the woods," said Inspector Ferguson.

Dan glanced sidewise at his guest. "I was hoping—knowing you since he was a little shaver and always remembering you was the one who gave him his first good trout fishing outfit—he wouldn't act this way with you around, Inspector. . . . Well, I guess we might as well eat."

"Bob will get well in time, Dan."

"His body is well now," said Dan, shaking his head. "He goes off like this, sometimes, and tramps the woods all day. Comes home and cuts wood like he'd just rolled out of his bunk." He tapped his own white temple. "It's up here, Inspector. And getting worse. I'll show you what I mean."

Dan went to his cot in the other room, lifted the mattress at the foot and came back with a small flat cardboard box. He opened it. It was half-full of small squares of paper.

"Last three letters from Lottie Dale. He

tore 'em up without opening 'em. Saw him do it and picked up the scraps after he'd gone off in the woods. First time, I raised blue hell with him for treating Lottie that way. He blazed right back at me. Said no woman could stand a face like his across the breakfast table for more than a week, no matter how much pity was in her heart. Pity—the fear of it—that's what's the matter with him. Got to the point where he won't even look at himself in a mirror when he shaves. Does it in the dark."

"Has anybody suggested he grow a full beard?" asked Inspector Ferguson. "That would hide most of the scar except for just under his left eye."

"You didn't get a good look," said Dan. "All the skin on that side of the face came from another man's shoulder. The doctors worked fast. One man dies on the operating table. On the next operating table, six feet away is a man with the left side of his face gone. Bob told me the one that died was Lottie's brother, Ed. The doctors didn't know that. They did what they thought was the right thing."

Inspector Ferguson put down his coffee cup.

"Dan, can you spare the gas to drive me into town? I'm—well, I'm looking for some special instructions from the district chief."

They drove into Bear Lake. But before Dan let the inspector out at the post office he warned, "Don't you be telling Lottie what I said about Ed. She is still going by a telegram from Washington that said he was missing in action. Natural, she should set her heart that he is a prisoner, and safe."

"Bob ought to tell her the truth," said Inspector Ferguson.

Dan shook his head. "Be worse on Bob to have to tell her than her going on thinking awhile longer there's a chance of Ed coming home again."

JUST as Inspector Ferguson was about to leave the car, a large man laid a hand on the window ledge on Dan's side and said, "Say, Coleman, I'd like to rent that cabin of yours over on Torch River I had during the hay fever season last year." A confident smile spread over his large but not unhandsome features. "I'm playing the early bird this time. Say the word and I'll take it for the whole season this time."

"My Torch River place is already spoken for," said Dan with an ill-concealed lack of cordiality.

"Bet you fifty against five," retorted the large man, unperturbed, "nobody has laid three hundred dollars in your mitt for that cabin, like I'm ready to do this minute."

Dan forestalled the movement of a big hand, with a three-carat diamond on the little finger, toward the large man's inside pocket of his light jacket. "The place is already spoken for and I don't go back on my word."

"You'll never die rich following that line," said the large man with a shrug and turned away.

"Who is that?" asked Inspector Ferguson, without deflecting his undivided attention from studying the set of those broad shoulders and the faintly arrogant stride of the large man.

"Name's Taylor. Showed up around here summer before last. Talks big about his mine and timber holdings up in Minnesota and out West. Says this is the first place he hasn't started sneezing in rose time and clear through hay fever time in August. Did a lot of duck hunting here this fall too."

"I'll bet you ten against one," commented Inspector Ferguson dryly, "you haven't rented your Torch River cabin for the season. Not for money, anyway."

"I'm keeping it so's Bob can have some place to go to when he wants to get away from my gab," said Dan tartly.

"So his name is Taylor and he says he is a timber man," mused Inspector Ferguson.

"He may own a scad of stumpage but he never laid a double-bitt ax to a tree, I'll bet you."

With good reason in the past to respect Dan's shrewd deductions pertaining to any phase of outdoor life, Inspector Ferguson said, "What makes you say that, Dan?"

"It's plain as an ax blaze on a slippery elm," snapped Dan. "You heard him say he rented my Torch River camp for last year's hay fever season. Well, he stayed on through the pa'tridge shooting."

"Skipped his rent, did he?"

"No; worse." Dan stabbed a frayed nickel cigar into the corner of his thin-lipped mouth then added, contemptuously. "He packed up and pulled out without leaving

any dry kindling under the stove. That's something no woodsman would ever do. Sure to leave some dry kindling under the stove, case the next man got there in the rain or in a blizzard and could get a fire going quick. It can come close to murder, sometimes, to clean a camp of dry kindling," he added grimly.

Inspector Ferguson unfolded his long lean legs and went into the post office, mindful of Dan's warning not to tell Lottie Dale, who was acting as postmistress during her brother's leave of absence, that the brother was dead, not simply missing in action. He found Lottie still sorting the mail back of the partition and the delivery and money order windows down.

"Just helping out until the young fellows come back," he explained in response to Lottie's surprised look when he informed her that he was back on active duty as a postal inspector, then added, "They'll be back sooner than some of the calamity howlers claim, don't you worry."

"I hope so," sighed Lottie, with an unconscious glance at two photographs over the desk—one of her brother Ed and the other of Bob Allison.

Inspector Ferguson became all business. He asked Lottie if she had delivered any parcel post or registered mail packages to strangers within the past three weeks. Lottie was sure she had not. Any undelivered registered packages in the safe? No, there were not. . . . How about insured parcel post packages—was anybody getting an unusual number of those?

"I think there's one on the sorting table now," said Lottie, tumbling over a half-dozen small packages before picking one up. "Yes, this one. It's addressed to 'C. V. Taylor.'"

"Taylor—the man who rented Dan's Torch River camp last summer?" asked Inspector Ferguson, taking the package and giving it a swift professional scrutiny. "M'n'n—from Gorvel and Hayes Sporting Goods Store, Detroit. Declared value, thirty-three ninety-six." He shook the package close to his ear. "Mostly flies and leaders and light stuff. Tape-sealed, too. . . . Wait a second!"

Inspector Ferguson slipped the tip of his penknife under the gummed paper tape sealing the top of the package and peeled it back for an inch or two. Underneath was another strip of gummed tape of a slightly different shade of brown. The under layer of tape had been slit with a sharp knife.

Working with the precision of a surgeon transferring a skin graft, Inspector Ferguson removed every vestige of the two layers of gummed tape from the package. His hand plunged inside and came out with a small package, encrusted with red wax seals, which had been securely wedged between a box of Royal Coachman trout flies and a fly line box.

"'Parkins and Sons, Diamond Merchants,'" he read aloud from the address. "'Registered number one-seven-six-eight.'" He put the registered package back into the parcel post box, then sealed it with a roll of gummed tape from his jacket pocket.

"Now listen carefully, Lottie," Inspector Ferguson placed the resealed package over on the desk and covered it with a sheet of newspaper. "If our friend Mr. Taylor calls for this package this afternoon, it hasn't arrived—officially. Understand?"

"Y-e-s."

"Watch his eyes when you tell him that," instructed Inspector Ferguson. "Notice if he shows any signs of disappointment. Don't stare, just look when you say no, then turn your head. He will come back tomorrow. You will give him the package then. But first make him sign this receipt. It's chemically treated to pick up his fingerprints, so be careful this is the one he signs. Don't touch it yourself, except by this upper left hand corner, I've turned up for you. Is everything clear?"

Lottie Dale repeated the instructions word for word. Inspector Ferguson nodded approval.

"Now let me out the back door into the alley. If Taylor is outside waiting for your delivery window to go up, I wouldn't care to have him wondering who that white-haired old crane is coming out from behind this partition where only people with official business are allowed."

Lottie Dale started to unbolt the back door, then looked up pleadingly.

"*Please,* will you tell Bob that I am still waiting—that I'll still be waiting all the rest of my life for him? Just tell him that, Inspector. Bob will understand!"

"I'll do better than that, my young

lady," promised Inspector Ferguson with a comforting nod. "I'll bring that handsome young scamp into town, tomorrow night after I get through with my official business, and you can tell him yourself."

By nine o'clock that night, however, he was beginning to feel a little dubious about his ability to keep that promise to Lottie Dale. He sat before the small fire in Dan's cabin, puffing at his pipe and squinting down his long legs at the heavy wool socks covering his feet.

"Dan, I'm beginning to worry about Bob. He went off in his shirt sleeves and it's dropping close to frost outside tonight."

"Bob's good enough woodsman to sleep warm and dry if it was raining fire engines," said Dan, blowing the frayed end of his cigar into the fire. "Besides, he is holed up in my Torch River place, with a pot of coffee and flapjacks and a can of corn syrup on the table, right this minute, I'll bet you. Maybe chomping a mess of frogs legs too. There's some big ones over there." Dan raked ashes up over the back log with a broken automobile spring leaf as a broad hint it was bed time in the cabin and made his final comment of the night: "I dunno, sometimes, whether to follow around and try talking him out of it or go on like I'm doing —leave him alone like a wild critter that's lost a foot in a trap and holes up under a stump until it heals over."

DAN went to bed. He was up and gone on his regular fire patrol through the woods before Inspector Ferguson rolled out of his blankets and made his own flapjacks from the pan of batter Dan had whipped up and left on the shelf above the stove.

The inspector fished the bend above the cabin and came back about noon with four brook trout. There was no sign that Bob had returned. Around two, Dan returned and they both drove into town in the Model A.

As they rolled past the county building, with a small box-like jail building at the side nearest the road, Dan pulled up and nodded in that direction, to where a group of boys were staring up at a barred window.

"Looks like the sheriff has been doing some business. Luke's coming this way now. We'll ask him. Hunh, looks like he was making a set to ask *us* something," added Dann, as the sheriff walked directly toward the car.

"Howdy, Luke. Who you free-boarding in the jug this time?"

The sheriff pushed his hat to the back of his head and leaned the elbows of his leather jacket on the car window ledge.

"I picked up the customer who's been busting into Curt's store over your way and making free sleeping in other folks's summer places along Torch River. Picked him up at your cabin, about midnight last night. It's Bob Allison, Dan. We caught him dead to rights, eating out of a can of minced ham stole from Curt's store just a week ago."

"That's the plumb stupidest idea I ever heard tell of," exploded Dan the moment he recovered from the stunning surprise of the news. "That was my cabin and my grub. The whole county knows Bob is welcome to do what he pleases there, same as if he was my own boy. You turn him loose, and quick, or I'll—"

Inspector Ferguson laid a firmly quieting hand on Dan's explosive shoulder.

"Will Curt Stoggins be able to prove to the satisfaction of a jury that it was his property Bob had in his possession when you made the arrest?"

"You bet he will," replied the sheriff, professionally confident. "I fixed it up with all the storekeepers in the county to use a marking pencil on all their canned stuff. Each one making his own kind of a mark on the bottom of the can. Bob was caught with one of Curt's marked cans, and a half dozen more in a box under his bed."

"What charge are you holding him on?" questioned Inspector Ferguson.

"Petty larceny right now. Maybe by tonight, I'll have enough evidence to turn him over to the grand jury on a stiffer rap."

Inspector Ferguson reached down into his hip pocket and passed his wallet to Dan. "You scoot down town and get a lawyer on this, Dan. I don't think the judge will hold Bob for more than a hundred dollars bail." He got out of the car himself and nodded to the sheriff. "Take me inside. I want to talk to the boy."

Dan said, "You was in a sweat to get to the post office before two, Inspector. Anything you want me to tell Lottie?"

"I've changed my mind," said Inspector

Ferguson and walked to the jail with the sheriff.

"You know it would take some mighty strong evidence for me to pull in a boy just back out of the service, wounded and with a flock of medals. I'm an American Legion man myself—"

"You must have been pretty sure you had the right man," was Inspector Ferguson's dry comment.

They were inside the sheriff's office now. The sheriff turned disturbed eyes on the inspector.

"You sound like I've pulled a big boner." Almost apologetically he pointed to a fiber canned goods case on his desk. "There's the evidence, dead to rights."

"M-n-n—" mused the inspector, turning up one can after another and examining Curt Stoggins' crayon mark on the bottom of each. "Who tipped you off that the boy was hiding out in Dan's Torch River Camp?"

"I ain't saying," replied the sheriff bluntly. "The defense will find that out at the trial."

"I'll save you the trouble," said Inspector Ferguson, dropping a can back into the box of evidence. "Your informer was a recent new member of your American Legion post. Joined last year, I believe, and a rather free spender. He supplied a case of pretty fair stuff for your last Legion Christmas stag party."

The sheriff eyed his visitor with a slow blink. "For a man who's been in the county not quite twenty-four hours in the last three years, Inspector, you been picking up considerable gossip."

"I met Herb Keeler, the barber, fishing Rikker's Dam this morning," smiled Inspector Ferguson. He reached inside his jocket and handed the sheriff a small handbill. "Your star new member is D. D. Taylor, alias Ice House Joe, and wanted by the Post Office Department for several little ventures in loose diamonds that failed to arrive by registered mail. Now if you'll let me use your telephone, I'll put in a couple of long-distance calls."

"Help yourself, Inspector. And maybe I'd better see the prosecutor and the judge while you're doing it."

In a few minutes Inspector Ferguson was talking to his district chief: "Seems like a new stunt, Carrigan. The man on the inside slits open a parcel post package, tucks in the registered package and seals up the switch-package with gummed tape. The registered packages vanishes, and the parcel post package comes on through to Ice House Joe. I would suggest we send through another pair of packages as a decoy—one parcel post, the other small and registered. We should be able to pick up the inside man in the act of stowing the registered package inside the— That's it. . . . Ice House Joe? Oh, I'll take care of him. He may be mussed up a little when you see him, but— No, for strictly personal reasons; I feel in need of a little exercise."

As Inspector Ferguson prepared to hang up, the Bear Lake exchange operator cut in, "The post office is waiting on the line, sir."

That would be Lottie, reporting on the delivery of that package to Taylor, alias Ice House Joe. Instead it was Dan; and very much excited: "He's skun out! Made off with the package, hell bent for out of town. . . . Quiet, back there, I can't hear myself think! . . . . I was talking to somebody else, Inspector your pigeon has flown the coop."

"Fine business, Dan," said Inspector Ferguson. "Now drive around here and we'll put on a war dance together."

The inspector was still chuckling softly to himself when he turned away from the telephone. There stood Bob Allison in the doorway leading to the cell corridor. A beam of sunlight illuminated the unscarred side of his face. There was a glint of sardonic amusement in his eye.

"Don't let it get you," said Inspector Ferguson, quietly. "Mistakes are bound to happen. I tossed a bishop in the tank once myself."

Bob said, "I'm not sore at anybody around here." He flexed the fingers of two powerful hands whose strength had been restored by a month's wood chopping. "But I'd like to get these around the pipes of that yard bird who broke into Dan's Torch River camp and busted that fly rod you gave me."

Just then Dan's Model A horn started squawking outside. Inspector Ferguson said, "Come on, Bob, that's just who we're going after."

Dan was spluttering with excitement when they climbed into the car.

"Great balls of fire, Inspector, more

blamed things have happened in this town today. Lottie just told me—"

"Take us into your Torch River camp by the gravel pit trail, Dan," said the Inspector, slamming the door. "And step on it."

Dan killed his engine dead by jumping into high gear by mistake, but finally got rolling again.

"Hadn't we better stop and see Lottie at the post office, first?" he asked excitedly. "She's fit to be tied—"

"Torch River first," cut in Inspector Ferguson, curtly. "And listen carefully, you two, because there isn't time to go over it twice. . . ."

HE THEN explained the nature of their mission: For two years Taylor had been looting the registered mails of his specialty in crime—unset diamonds. He had been hiding them somewhere around the Torch River cabin to let them cool off before risking offering them for sale.

"So that's why he turned the law on me," growled Bob Allison at the Inspector's shoulder in the back seat, after he had heard the story.

"And very accommodating of him," commented Inspector Ferguson. "We knew those diamonds were cached some place. But until he planted that stolen canned goods where you would be caught with it—so he could stop your troublesome unannounced visits—I was stumped."

Inspector Ferguson suddenly reached out and tapped Dan's shoulder. "Pull over into that thicket ahead. We'll walk the rest of the way in. Dan, don't throw any lead with your cannon unless you have to stop him from getting away in his car."

At the edge of the clearing, the inspector motioned for Dan to circle around and get behind Ice House Joe's car.

"Motor's running for a quick getaway," whispered Bob in Inspector Ferguson's ear as they crept up on the cabin. "Do you want him alive, or will just a few pieces do?"

The flutter of a loose baffle plate in the muffler completely drowned out all sounds of their cautious approach. Inspector Ferguson peered into the cabin from a back window. Ice House Joe was standing on a chair he had placed on a table and was reaching up into the dark recesses where the roof sloped down to the log walls. One by one he was dropping small packages into a black leather handbag held in his left hand.

"I'll count ten to give you time to hit the front door," whispered Inspector Ferguson to Bob. "I'll come in from the back. He never had packed a gun, but don't take any chances."

Bob turned a confident grin over his shoulder. "Just so he isn't carrying a hand grenade, I should worry. Start counting, Inspector!"

". . . seven—eight—nine—ten!" Inspector Ferguson hit the flimsy back door of the cabin and catapulted halfway across the small kitchen before he recovered his balance. The next instant he was looking straight down the muzzle of a .45 Colt's automatic held unwaveringly in Ice House Joe's big hand, up there on the chair atop the table.

"Don't move, you—"

Ice House never got to finish, for the lean, battle-trained body of one of Carlson's Marine raiders buckled his knees from behind and brought him to the floor with a stunning crash.

Inspector Ferguson had his handcuffs snapped over two thick hairy wrists almost before Ice House Joe hit the floor.

Bob Allison flipped the safety catch onto the .45 Colt and said reprovingly to Inspector Ferguson: "Bad business, busting in on a guy set to start blasting at the first sound, Inspector. The idea is to sneak up within grabbing distance. Then it makes no difference what he's got to fill his hand with." Bob grinned half-sheepishly. "Anyway, that's how we do it in the Raiders, sir."

Suddenly, Inspector Ferguson reached out a long arm and took a somewhat foggy shaving mirror from the log mantelpiece over the fireplace. He thrust it in front of Bob Allison's grin.

"What's wrong with the way you look now, son?" he asked laconically.

"Gosh—" Bob Allison took the mirror in both hands. But by that time the grin was gone. The scar tissue under his left eye had contracted again as the corner of his mouth dropped. He shook his head. "For a moment there, I looked almost human—"

"Fake a good big smile," suggested Inspector Ferguson.

Holding the mirror until it trembled in

his hands, Bob Allison deliberately faked a grin. The left eyelid, which had been pulled down to expose its bloodshot inner surface by the tension of scar tissue, again closed to almost normal position; and the dead white smoothness of the grafted skin on his left cheek became interlaced with crow's feet and crinkles.

"Does that give you any smart ideas, Bob?" inquired Inspector Ferguson, casually taking the mirror away and laying it face down on the mantel.

"Does it, does it give me ideas?" yelled Bob, grabbing Inspector Ferguson's hand and almost wrecking every bone in it. "Look, you and Dan can get this yard bird into town by yourselves—I'm grabbing that car outside. I've got to try this smile where it won't be wasted!"

Inspector Ferguson reached down and shook Ice House Joe's shoulder. "Let's be going. There's a nice new suit waiting for you at Alcatraz, Ice House."

After the prisoner had been placed on the back seat with his ankles securely lashed to the foot rail, Dan, who had been sputtering and fuming with suppressed news, turned on Inspector Ferguson.

"Why in tunket didn't you let me tell Bob the big news?"

"What big news?" asked Inspector Ferguson, walking right into what Dan would have called a dead set.

"Why about Ed. Dale showing up in town this afternoon—"

"What?" gasped Inspector Ferguson.

"I want a lawyer," growled Ice House Joe from the back seat; but nobody paid any attention.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you ever since we came helling out here," snapped Dan crossly. "Ed got separated from his outfit in the same fight where Bob got his face shot off. He spent three months in the jungle, knocking off Japs when they got too close. Finally swiped himself a native canoe and paddled his way out, ga'nt as a gutted snow bird from the malaria bug. They shipped him home and give him thirty days sick leave."

Dan jerked his frayed cigar out of his mouth and spat out the frayed end.

"Now, dang it, Bob will go busting into town and run smack into the news without warning. It's liable to drive him out of his head, permanent."

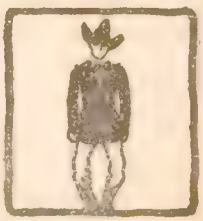
"I want a lawyer. I got rights, I want a lawyer," growled Ice House Joe from the back seat of the Model A. "Say, what hit me from behind awhile back—a five-ton truck?"

"No, a Marine, Ice House," said Inspector Ferguson, climbing into the seat beside Dan. "Let's go. Maybe I'll get there in time to give the bride away. But we'll have to hurry."

Spring Fashion Note

By S. OMAR BARKER

TO KEEP up with fashion in cities costs money—
And that to the hired man on horseback seems funny,
For out punchin' cows, the spring fashion we foller
Is just to reach up and unbutton your collar!



For Someone Low Water in Cajun Bend Spelled Menace

Low Water in Cajun Bend

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

BAYOU current barely moved this morning. And passing the last deep hole left in Bayou Dulat, at the end of the sandbar across from the Jones' store on the wooded side, Tete Veret quickened his paddle stroke. He always did so when he came in from his traplines on the Gentry side, the swampgrass side where a trapper was free to roam.

Hasten his pirogue and look overside into the brown clear water. Dim shapes down there in the deep hole. When the sunlight flickered they seemed to move. Nothing but rusty iron, sodden timbers, wreckage of the little ditching dredge with which Gentrys had tried to drain their swamp lands years ago.

M'sieu Felix Gentry had vanished somewhere on Dulat in the big storm when the levee broke in the river.

"This place of Cajun Bend I do not like," Tete muttered, and cast a hostile glance at the Jones store. "Why so, eh?" He shifted his calloused feet among his rusty traps and passed the sandbar. Above it, on the Gentry side, was Oncle's thatched shack almost hidden in the cane, but now there was a wide mudbank to shove his dugout through. A record drought was on Southern Louisiana, and worse yet the convict gang was closing the last old gap in the levee. No

more fresh river water would reach Bayou Dulat. It was bad for trapping.

"Yesterday," Tete grumbled, "Oncle, one muskrat. This mawnin—no rat—me! Rat go, duck go! Dulat, she stink. But Dulat men will not go ask M'sieu Jone for permit in his cypress where now is only water. No!"

Something drifted in the last current aided by the breeze. He recognized it as a piece of his old fish seine which he had abandoned on the levee when he gave up that catfish business. And in a tangle of the cork floats and cord was a piece of brown paper. Tied there. That was odd.

He dragged the rotted net across his bare, calloused feet. The brown paper had scrawls on it with a lead pencil, but Tete could not read. When he shoved his dugout across the mud to his landing before the shack he threw the piece of seine and paper there and went to the shack in the grass. Back of the grass was the ancient Gentry plantation house on the oak knoll. On the gallery, under the thatch sat young Mr. Gentry in a corduroy hunting suit, baggy pants and shiny boots, and Oncle Veret was dripping coffee over the charcoal furnace pot. Oncle took one look into the trapper's dugout and shrugged. Not a pelt.

"Hi!" grinned Armand Gentry. "Pulled your traps out. I couldn't find a marsh hen or a duck. The grass is dried as never before, Tete."

"I 'ave drag my pirogue in dust on the trapline. Oncle, mebbe so, we go moss-pick down Grand Lake, heh? Never to M'sieu Jone for permit!"

"Coffee, first," observed Oncle tranquilly. Dulat men had trapped for generations on Gentry lands and never a lease or permit. Likely that was why old Felix Gentry had left bankrupt acres to young Armand. Old Felix, himself, had vanished mysteriously in the big storm when the river levee broke and tore his ditching machine loose to wreck it in Cajun Bend.

"When I drain my swamp," grinned Armand, "you trappers will have forty acres and a mule apiece and raise truck. When—I say!"

"Heh, mule!" said Tete. "What I hear about mule, Armand?"

Young Gentry had just got back, and with a limp to his left leg. He had been in Yale law school and then the army; and the story had got about Dulat village that he had been discharged because a mule fell on him. Armand admitted it to the Verets. "No, it wasn't a Jap mule or a German mule. Just a damn Mississippi mule. It was on maneuvers, and this mule tried to jump a fox hole I was in. He didn't make it. Took the engineers two hours to pry me loose—I was mashed that flat. Well, home now, I'll drain the land and have mules and you boys'll be driving 'em."

Tete had been raised with Armand and didn't expect him to be serious about muskrats, mules or life in general.

SO THIS morning, Oncle shook his head again over the son of his old friend Felix Gentry. A very bad time for jokes from this wild one. No rat pelts for trappers, no law case for young attorneys who had been mashed flat by a delta mule. He changed the subject hastily.

"I observe, mebbe rain come—eh? Water along the traplines, eh?"

"She is too late now," said Tete. "The muskrat is gone. The bayou, he stink. Dead water all the way to Dulat village. People will moss-pick in the cypress or go up to the river and fish. I try that last spring. Twenty dollar for a seine for catfish and gaspargou. I was swindle by the riverman. The seine, he rotten. I throw it out my boat and come back to Dulat. Now, no trap, heh?"

Young Gentry shifted his baggy trousered legs and polished boots; the trappers thought it would be a pity to get mud on such swell Eastern clothes as Armand had come home in. But mud? There was crinkled dry crusts in the trapping runs now. Gentry picked up his fine shotgun and whistled to his hound dog. That old dog, Pelt, still stuck around with Celeste, the housekeeper, in his decayed plantation house back of the cane swamps but he, too, had a lame leg. Relic of Armand's carefree youth, but getting worn out like everything else along Bayou Dulat.

"I'm going home back along the little oak ridge. Maybe get a wood duck or a marsh hen. No more coffee, Oncle, thanks."

"You get no rail or duck now. The water, she gone dead. She worse soon—unless he rain. The last gap in the back levee close today."

They all listened in the warm Indian summer silence. The fifty-yard wide bayou had just a tiny flow past Tete's camp and then on past the Jones store and landing, and around the dry white sandbar into Cajun Bend. Slowing current. They could hear faint work sounds. Prisoners from the county jail with mules and scrapers on the levee fill.

THE trappers had heard that for weeks. Strokes of doom to the Gentry trapping lands they said. Tete had been once to the stockade and talked to Octo through the wires. His cousin, Octo, had been unfortunate. Mr. Jones' agent who dealt with the trapping permits, had met Octo in the grass beyond the Jones cypress, where the boundaries were in dispute, and this agent had gone to the hospital with a badly gashed head. Tete thought of that now as young Mr. Gentry was turning away with his dog and shotgun and fancy boots. Tete grinned at his boyhood chum; now they were both slender, browned young men with alert eyes, narrowed by sun and wind; Tete with the frayed denim pants of a swamper, and Armand's college clothes made no difference.

"Wait, Armand, I 'ave to say. I tell my Cozzin Octo now he will get from the jailhouse cause yo' are back and a lawyer, heh? I say to him, 'Octo, M'sieu Armand will go to the judge and remark he is the friend of all Dulat trappers—'"

"Not a chance," Armand grinned back. "Those buzzards at the courthouse would toss me out on my ear. Octo hit a Jones' man, and Jones does politics. That's how he gets a good road to his back fields, and the levee fixed, even if it ruins trapping on the Gentry side. Now I want to win my first law case, but I can't against Jones. Oncle knows how he schemed years and years to get title to my father's lands by hook or crook, don't you, Oncle? Always tried to ruin the Gentrys."

Oncle stirred his Cajun coffee, black and strong. "To dig with a shovel all day is no good for a trapping man," he observed diplomatically. "Cozzin Octo, he dig, but in that camp is one who does not dig. Tamas, the Spanish man, who was M'sieu Jone overseer in days when your father 'ave the dredge. Tamas 'ave to go jail on account of fightin' and cuttin' with a shantyboat man, eh? But he does no work, that one."

"No good, like Jones," said Armand. "Shot and poisoned my dogs when I was a kid, if they crossed the bayou. Remember, Tete?"

Tete pursued a lone mosquito about his neck. One mosquito; it was sure dry when the shack didn't have mosquitoes, and a man had to have the smudge going in the charcoal pot in the middle of the room at dusk. He came out on his bare hard feet to bid Gentry a goodby. Oncle nodded from the coffee pot over the warm charcoal embers. Armand had hunted every morning since he got back and shot nothing. Even mockingbirds had deserted the fringe of brush along the Gentry side of Dulat to go to the Jones woods. Yes, a small 'gator had been seen deserting the big grass! But Tete wanted to encourage his friend.

"I 'ave seen one rail down by the sandbar. Mebbe so, you get him? Come back and mek jambalaya. Oncle 'ave salt pork and peppers and little onion. If we had one catfish, heh?"

Gentry laughed as he turned. Then Tete saw his mud-rotted length of seine where he had dragged it to his landing. That dirty brown paper still hooked in it. "Wait, I 'ave something. You read the English, heh? Oh, sho, come back from school you do!"

He reached down for the paper. "I meant to ask somebody who been to school. How come this reading tied in a cork of my ol' net?"

Armand took it idle, smoothed out the wet side. "So what?"

"On the ol' cork floats of my seine this drift around the upper bend in the little wind. You smell him, Armand?"

"Smell what? I smell lousy bayou water."

"I smell jail smell. These piece of paper smell lak my cozzin, Octo. He say in the workcamp, they put something around the bunks and in the clothes. For bugs, Octo say. He don't lak, it him." He came down to Gentry." So I say, the paper came from the levee camp, eh?"

Armand was looking at the lead pencil scrawl on the wet paper. Hard enough to read at best. "From the work camp, is it? Hold on!"

He read slowly: "Gap close today. You look out, this is warnin."

HE STOPPED and looked at Tete before he smoothed the rest of the paper. In the doorway Oncle, coffee cup in hand, his grizzled chin wet from it, was looking down the bayou at Cajun Bend. A skiff was out now between the white sandbar and the Jones' landing. Mr. Jones, bulky and bent of shoulders, seemed taking the sun idly. Young Gentry grunted over the paper again. "Warning? Who for? This says, 'I will come tonight. Cajun Bend, the low water —you look out.'"

There was a scrawl at the end that made no sense. Armand looked again at Tete. Tete explained again. "Low water, heh? Sho is low water! The gap close, he be more low. What more is on the paper?"

"Nothing." Armand turned to see what the coffee fiend was looking at. Mr. Jones idling in his skiff forty yards from his landing. "I don't get this. The paper was fixed to a piece of your old seine to drift from the prisoners' camp down Bayou Dulat. The corks would float it. Message from one of the workgang? What, and who for?"

Oncle shrugged and drank coffee. "I observe M'sieu Jone for some time waiting out in the bayou. Maybe so, M'sieu Jone."

Armand smelled of the paper. But his hands smelled of dog and not disinfectant. Cajun trappers have keen noses, and also careful hands if they bait for mink or otter. He handed the paper to Tete who smelled it carefully. "I say from a man of the stockade. Who would that be, heh? I will guess it is that bad one, Tamas. You will remember he work for M'sieu Jone long time?"

"Cajun Bend—low water," young Gentry mused. "No sense."

"He warn somebody against low water. Now M'sieu Jone he row slowly. At the end of the big bar by the deep hole. He look down to see how low is the water now, heh? Maybe so he expect a message from his man Tamas who is frightened. Of what? Low water, you think?"

"Lower water yet tomorrow, with the last gap closed. Tamas would know that! He must have been desperate to get word to Jones!"

Armand came back and sat at the pine table. Oncle set the coffee back on the charcoal burner. He pushed the condensed milk nearer. Armand stirred from his thought.

"No, thanks——I don't get this. Jones has been the power behind the courthouse crowd to get work done on that back levee. It hurts me, closing it, but it doesn't affect his cypress lands. Say, Tete, why didn't you show me this paper before?"

"Mebbe I didn't think of it. She important, you think?"

"If what you say about Tamas is true —yes. Tamas is afraid of something. Low water in Cajun Bend. And he's coming out today, served his time; but he can't wait. Afraid Jones will do something. He must have drifted messages to Jones before this, for Jones is expecting something adrift on Bayou Dulat. Jones wouldn't go near him in the prison camp. Two crooked guys, Oncle—they bucked my father for years when he wanted to reclaim swamp lands. Lots of little tricks, I recall father saying."

"So, in big stawm, and the levee break up at Leroux, M'sieu Gentry go on patrol and he neve' come back. Nobody could save his ol' dredge. Well, he bad stawm. At Leroux many people drown. Two days I was on search, first for M'sieu Gentry down Dulat, and then in the cypress. One day I find four dead ladies on a tree. It was unfortunate."

Old stuff to young Gentry. He got up and went to the door.

"Jones went back to his store. He's getting out of his car, and he seems moving faster than I ever saw the old polecat move. I wonder if he's going to the levee camp to see Tamas?"

"Then he worried also," said Oncle tranquilly. "Better you 'ave coffee now, M'sieu Armand. I do not worry—me."

Tete was crumbling cornbread on the floor and then shoving a bare horny foot over it to worry the hound. The old dog didn't worry.

"Jones closes the store every afternoon, except Saturday, until six, when the field hands came around to trade," pursued Gentry. "So maybe he won't be back soon. I'd like to look into Cajun Bend. Oncle says it looks like rain. If the grass filled with water Bayou Dulat would raise a bit. And it wouldn't be clear either, would it?"

"Salt water has come up from the coast far as the village," said Oncle. "It is no good for rat or duck or deer, M'sieu Ar-

mand. It is in the well at the village, very bitter now. And no rain for the barrels. That is what drain do for us, M'sieu Armand. A levee from the river gap is sho bad, heh?"

"I'm not going to open the old argument with you, Oncle. If I could drain my lands I'd have money. And you Dulat men could have forty acres out beyond the forty-arpent line and be truck farmers."

Oncle smiled and shook his head. It was an old argument—thirty years old, with Armand's father, who'd tried to drain his swamps and went broke. Then the crevasse and the hurricane got him. The forty-arpent line was the century-old demarkation beyond which Cajuns said no cultivation could go, and they didn't want it tried. They didn't want forty acres and a mule even as a gift and never had. Young Gentry shrugged; these were his people but they were ruinously stubborn. No good trapping left on his side, and Dulat men wouldn't deal with Jones. Anyhow, they were loyal to the Gentrys as their fathers had been.

Gentry looked across at the enemy's country again. The store closed, the yard deserted. Behind the trees he could hear the field hands' cheerful voices berating the Jones' mules at the fall plowing. There was a kind of a prosperity over there, and the Gentry side was a jungle.

"Warnin'—" he mused, "Cajun Bend. I'm going to hunt that way. You didn't notice anything unsual when you came from your traplines?"

"Me, I didn't look, so sorry about rats."

"You go back in your pirogue. I'll take the bank. Come, Pelt."

THE old hound refused to fall for Tete's cornbread racket so he followed out. Tete shoved his dugout from the landing. Oncle drank more coffee and went after Armand pessimistically. The trapper's world was collapsing; but a man could moss-pick or go down to salt water and crab-fish. No mules and forty acres. Young men like Tete might do so.

Tete paddled slowly down the bayou past the ramshackle store back by the plantation road. He could hear Armand and Oncle in the cane and dry little sloughs, and once old Pete poked a puzzled nose down to the mud shore. He drifted past the dry sandbar idly, and at its end, snug against the mud bank was the deep hole. It had been a huge "sandboil" forgotten years ago when a mighty floodcrest in the river had thrust underground and wormed to the surface to leave this deep sink. Sandboils were dreaded warnings behind the levees; the earth was bound to give way before such pressure, and Cajuns took to boats or trees. Tete couldn't remember when this one appeared; it was long before the disaster that tore Gentry's little dipper dredge loose from his canal above and wrecked it in Cajun Bend.

Tete looked down as he crossed the hole. The brown water deepened off to where he could make out those dim shapes again. Timbers and iron half-buried now, but low water was bringing the wreckage of the Gentry hopes to plainer outline. He stroked to the mud shore and waited. Presently Oncle came through the high cane billows with Armand behind him, and they stirred dust in what had once been a trapping run.

"See anything?" Armand sweated in corduroys and shiny boots.

"Nozzin. Except yo' dog come out to the bar and go back quick."

"Thirsty. A polecat wouldn't drink this water now."

Armand looked about. "Cajun Bend—peaceful spot. Before dad's dredge was sunk here I used to go swimmin' in that deep spot. And fish."

"No fish," said Oncle. "All dead. Bayou, he stink, heh? Look at yo' houn' M'sieu Armand. He 'ave trail to the bar up there."

The old dog had come to the bar. Nose low, nose high; then he sat down and gazed across the bayou at the Jones woods.

Gentry grunted, "Pelt, change your thoughts. Bad lands over there for Gentry dogs when I was a kid. Three poisoned, and we never could say who did it. Jones or Tamas. Trouble is you never can get the goods on a dog poisoner. I tried to teach Gentry hounds not to cross Dulat."

"This dog ain't crossin'," said Tete. "He smells trouble here."

He shoved his pirogue off and paddled up the bar twenty yards.

"I say the true! Skiff 'ave landed here and a man made tracks. Big good shoes, I bet me. They come along to the deep hole. You look."

"Don't make track on that sand then,"

said Oncle. "I see from the grass. M'sieu Armand, you go in the pirogue to look."

Tete took him in and they went to the spot. "Big, store shoes," said Armand. "Jones has been over last night or this morning."

"You sue him then for trespass, heh? You 'ave a law case sho!"

"Hell," said Armand. "Navigable water is government business."

"I say, hell, too," retorted Tete. "A mushrat won't navigate in Dulat no more. She stink like everything death."

Armand looked down in the dim water. He could see wavering shapes of wreckage, but there was a stout pole thrust into the sand. It went down, as if someone had probed the spot and lost a boathook fast in old gear.

Tete whistled. "What that? Mebbe so, I wade in and find out."

Oncle called from the bank, "M'sieu Jone he come back. His car turn behind the store. He will see us when he open the front."

Tete backed the dugout and came around below the swimmin' hole. Armand slid from the bow into the grass. The hound followed in and Oncle's whiskers and hat vanished back to the dry trail. No one said a word. But they all had the same thought. Watch Jones now!

TETE paddled up the bayou past the Jones landing, very leisurely as he always did. Jones had opened the front doors and stood on the store stoop watching the trapper. The store was open at five o'clock as usual. Two field hands were coming across the back fields, and a sunbonnetted Cajun girl was passing along the bayou road from the village below. A dry, gleaming sunset over the west Gentry grass swamps to the far cypress belt beyond. Peace, serene quiet on Cajun Bend. Tete passed without a look, and knew that Jones was watching him sharply. Tete raised his voice in song to soothe M'sieu Jone:

"All I want is free salvation,
An' forty acres in my ol' plantation—"

It didn't suit Mr. Jones. He snorted and went back to his counter and charged up some side meat against his field hands at thirty percent above fair prices. No man working his lands ever could get out of debt to the store. Trappers got no credit and wouldn't want it from M'sieu Jone. These old Gentry trappers wouldn't even buy permits from Jones as others did, in stubborn loyalty to the bankrupt family across Bayou Dulat. Treacherous lot, said Mr. Jones.

Tete got to his landing before the others, and sat yawning on the gallery before his shack.

Work had ceased at the levee camp a mile up the bayou, no more sounds of scrapers or shovels or shouts.

If the last gap was closed the camp captain would move the outfit to some other job. The tired work gang would be back behind the wire stockade at the evening meal. Cozzin Octo said they got bread and black molasses for supper, no grub for a bayou man. But the guards would be yawning at the gate by their tarpaper shack, hoping the camp would move tomorrow. Then Tete heard a gunshot in the big grass; maybe that meant a Cajun supper. Sure enough when Oncle and Armand showed up they had one skinny marsh rail.

"You stay to eat," said Oncle. "I 'ave onion and peppers for him."

"I sure will," Armand grinned and sat down. "Celeste isn't at the house, and Aurelie won't cook, and the yard boy has the shakes. I'm staying, Oncle; and we get a smell each of that damn bird. Old Pelt is out of luck for any bones too, the way I feel."

"Oncle can mek a jambalaya what like yo' never taste," said Tete. "We 'ave coffee, and wait. Then we got business, heh?"

"Jones—" Armand looked out across the bayou to the dusk in the Jones woods. A kerosene lamp burned in the store. The plantation house back of the fields was dark. "Tete, something is wrong with Jones. Prowling in the dark around Cajun Bend. On our side of the bayou. In old days, when the feud between Gentrys and the Jones' overseers was good, to cross this water would draw a load of buckshot. Maybe, as the last of the Gentry men, I'm not holding up well."

"I will get you a first law case," said Tete. "Lend me yo' shotgun, and I will go down and shoot both barrels into M'sieu Jone'

store. Then you run to the judge and get me out, heh?"

"Not against Jones. Octo got ninety days for hitting one of his trappers' agents over [illegible]. Jones won't fight personally but buckshottin' his store isn't going to be my first law case. No!"

He grinned and helped eat the skinny rail fixed with rice and onions and browned pork fat; it was pretty good jambalaya for the last provisions on Oncle's shelf. Then they smoked and watched the dark woods across. The stars came dimly out through a high smoke haze, and a man could smell the drought-rotted swamp. Oncle listened very intently near the door, and Tete grew restless.

"I go down the grass," he said. "If anybody stir across I will hear them. An oar to the water I will hear. You wait, heh?"

"No," Armand grunted. He was restless also over a vague mystery shaping in his mind. He couldn't name it, he could feel it in the silence. "Let's all go. We'll watch Cajun Bend from the bank."

"No," said Oncle. "Three mek too much noise. Tete is the best swamp man. M'sieu Armand, you 'ave been too much away from us."

"Too much law school, that it?" Armand sat back and grumbled. But when Oncle really grew firm he was law along Bayou Dulat. Tete nodded and vanished around the shack to the grass trail. The old dog hesitated a moment and followed. Armand thought of that; he had raised Pelt from a pup and now, in his old age, he quit the master silently to follow another man in the dark. Well, a dog knows things.

THEY sat a long time by the smoky oil lamp on the table, and Oncle warmed the coffee over the charcoal pot. The water beyond the plank landing reflected a few dim stars, broken by the slight breeze. A long time it seemed, and then the old trapper turned his head. Then Armand heard it—a sort of low moan from the dog, rising to a melancholy howl. Not loud, a note of trouble and bewilderment.

Oncle got up hastily. "One time I hear a dog so. It was when his man died. Something has now happen that is bad."

Armand followed him out and around the corner. Oncle was moving faster than he had done for years but he made no noise on the trail. Armand tried to keep him in sight between the high billowed cane. The path wound away from the bayou and then came in again by a dry little slough that had been Tete's last trapline run. Armand almost stumbled upon Oncle who was kneeling, and the hound's white flank showed just beyond. Oncle whispered as he knelt.

"Tete has been hurt. On his head blood—I feel blood."

"Wait," whispered Armand. "I've got a flashlight—a little pocket pencil light. Let's see now."

"Keep the light low, then, very low, so it not seen. So the dog 'ave a call—a death call for little Tete, eh?"

Armand laid the flashlight on the crinkled mud by Tete's ear. There was blood in matted hair above the temple.

"Snap up, Tete. It's just like a hard tackle. You've been clipped."

Tete's eyes shifted in the light. He gasped. Oncle put his hand over his mouth. He must not speak aloud, Oncle muttered. Armand whispered:

"So what! Who slugged you, boy?"

"From behind very quick. But I know who. I smell that man. Lak Cozzin Octo who 'ave to sleep in the bunk where is bug. So it is Tamas who attack me. Two time hit me so I 'ave very little sense now."

"Get up," whispered Armand. "Cajun Bend? This little trapping slough ends right at the sandbar, doesn't it? Come on, go easy."

"I will go first," said Oncle. "Now, for long time I am curious about this Tamas, who is not Dulat man, nor is M'sieu Jone, eh? I 'ave thought long time strange things. Of M'sieu Felix' little ditch machine which broke from his canal in the stawm, and sink in Cajun Bend. Many time I 'ave observe Tamas and M'sieu Jone look from the store here."

"Meaning what?" said Armand. "Strange things you thought? Well, no time for thoughts now. We're going to see things. Crawl for it in the dark. You first, Oncle. You said I'd been to college too long for a man on trail."

Oncle went silently. Armand crept behind him. And he felt Tete's hand on his country club boots behind. When Oncle's head came to where the narrow slough

dropped to the sand he halted. Armand raised his head. Over Oncle's shoulders he saw the whiter sandbar, and the dark water of the deep hole in Cajun Bend. Misty stars blurred in the dead stream.

Then he heard soft groping sounds, sludge of feet in sand, a clink of iron and then dripping water. Something like a man's breathing when he strains at a pole or a tight line. Then Armand made out what must be the bow of a boat, and there seemed moving blurred shapes.

"Two men," Armand whispered. "Working at some job in the old swimmin' hole. I never used it after the dredge sank. Dangerous iron—" Then he crouched. "This side is Gentry side. I'll battle for it—"

"Be still," Oncle warned. "Soon I see better what is done."

Armand was too highstrung to wait long. He edged up until he was alongside Oncle, the grass fringing their shoulders, but their faces clear, overhanging the two-foot drop from the slough to the sand. He could see dim shapes that seemed to move. You couldn't say how many men or what they were doing. But it seemed to be shoving and lifting, hauling at something under the water with a rope and poles. Then Armand could make out one man coming from the water and he, too, was hauling on a line. He spoke to another softly.

"Dragging a line from the wreck of my father's dredge in Cajun Bend," Gentry thought. "Tamas, is it? Then Jones! Pretty desperate if they had to act tonight!" Then he thought of that piece of paper Tete had found today. "The gap closed. Low water tonight! A warning!"

He nudged Oncle; they had to see more, act quick if they ever found out the secret of Cajun Bend. "Come on. I see two now. Two who must be Jones and Tamas. Come on—and quick! Tamas is a guy who'd shoot. Get him quick!"

Oncle tried to hold him but Armand was on his feet. He heard Tete gasp a warning but Armand was gone. Crouching forward slowly until he was close, and then he rushed. He stumbled over some gear in the sand and there was a mutter. The figures were still, and had turned to him. When Armand was close he recognized the bulky storekeeper, and he went for the other. A smaller, catlike man, Tamas, the overseer. Tamas was sidestepping when Armand went into him, enough of football blocking to whirl Tamas about, and as the Spaniard straightened, Armand swung for his chin.

Tamas yelled and staggered back free. Another shout came. Tete had passed Oncle and was charging the other man. Jones was too stupefied to resist. Then he tried to lumber heavily for his skiff. Tete hung a lean arm about Jones' thick neck and dragged and rode his back.

MR. JONES went down with his hands on the skiff's bow. Tete sat on him. Oncle stood a safe distance away and considered this affair gravely. Tete yelled at him:

"Old man, go help M'sieu Gentry with that Tamas!"

"I observe he is doing very well."

"Then come and hold Jone! I will help Armand!"

Oncle came up and sat down on Mr. Jones' back. The big man had lost his wind completely; he struggled a little and babbled with his face in the sand. Oncle watched young Mr. Gentry.

"Keep out of this, Tete," Armand panted. "This rat may have a gun! Sure, there it is under his feet. Get it!"

Tamas backed away from Armand's punches and stooped to get his pistol. He had it up when Armand swung squarely on his jaw. The Spanish man jerked the trigger, and the slug went into the sand under his belly. Armand pulled his arms around behind his back. Tete knelt down on him, for Tamas kept on fighting blindly.

"That shot—" Armand gasped. "Tete, you are all right?"

"Never hit me. Nor Oncle. Nor M'sieu Jone. We are all right."

Armand dug for the gun under Tamas and then dragged him from the spot. He was getting off his own belt. "Give a hand, Tete," he said thickly. "We can't trust this one. A rat, Tete—a rat!"

They tied Tamas' arms tightly with the leather. The Spanish man cursed and floundered. Armand stood up. "Where is Jones?"

"On him I sit here by his skiff," responded Oncle sedately. "He is very tired now. He does not try to get up."

"But we fix him also," Tete came over

and he was undoing the seine cord that did him for a belt. "Better so, heh?"

"Tie his arms." Armand's voice was heavy. "This Tamas poked me a couple in the wind. I am tired too. Play safe, Tete."

Tete finished with Jones and Oncle got up and walked away.

Armand watched him kneeling by the swimmin' hole peering at some object among the poles and lines. He called softly.

"Tete, yo' come here, please. No, not yo', M'sieu Armand. It is not for yo' to discover now."

"What the hell?" Armand stood by the captives and he could not understand this. Nor when Tete, who had recovered the pocket flashlight which Armand had dropped in the battle, smothered a cry.

The two trappers were busy a moment with the light and then Oncle came to Armand. "I am sorry, in distress. We think yo' 'ave better not see."

"Yes, I will," said Armand and he felt a sense of cold apprehension. Then he walked to where Tete stood by a shapeless bundle which seemed to be water-rotted rags and rusty chain.

Jones suddenly shouted hoarsely, "I tell you, I didn't know anything about this! Not until Tamas told me, warned me—low water—"

Oncle spoke quietly to Armand. "It is the body of yo' father."

Armand came closer, and he too was very quiet. "Father, and they were trying to recover his body! For what—why that?"

He took the flash and turned it briefly on matted, rotted cloth and bones. There was not much else; and Armand did not look again. He came back to where Jones grovelled. Tamas would not say a word or else he had passed out.

"To me, always a mystery," said Oncle. "I have never believed what was said. That M'sieu Felix was drowned the night of the stawm when the levee broke. It was said he left the house to go care for his dredge in the bayou canal above his house. That he was drowned in the *crevasse*, and never found. I say, he got to the dredge, and found Tamas there. The dredge was moored safe in the side canal. But Tamas cut the moorings, M'sieu Armand, to let it drift and wreck. He did that for M'sieu Jone to end yo' father's land drainage."

"My father surprised Tamas cutting the lines, and Tamas killed him! That's it! You know it, Jones!"

Jones was hysterical. "I didn't know Tamas killed him—not till tonight when Tamas had to confess it! I wanted the dredge wrecked—yes! Tamas said in the storm it would drift miles and sink in the lake!"

"Cajun Bend—" said Oncle quietly. "M'sieu Felix Gentry's body tied with chains so he not rise up, comes to Cajun Bend and stops, eh?"

"Just across from Jones' plantation," muttered Armand. "Watching Jones, you could say!"

"Waiting," said Tete. "Low water that would uncover him, and all men know M'sieu Felix is here and accusing!"

Jones writhed and moaned. "I tell you, I didn't know he was murdered! Would I have wanted the levee gap closed to make low water?"

"You didn't think that far. If the rains had come it wouldn't have mattered. Maybe anyhow, no one would have explored the dredge wreck."

"I think so," said Oncle. "But Tamas could not wait. Fear 'ave trapped that one. Bayou Dulat 'ave revenge on the men who ruin trapping."

"Oncle," said Armand tiredly. "You stay guard these two killers. Here's Tamas' gun. Tete and I will cross to Jones' store and break in. I'll telephone the sheriff. Tamas will hang—and I hope Jones also."

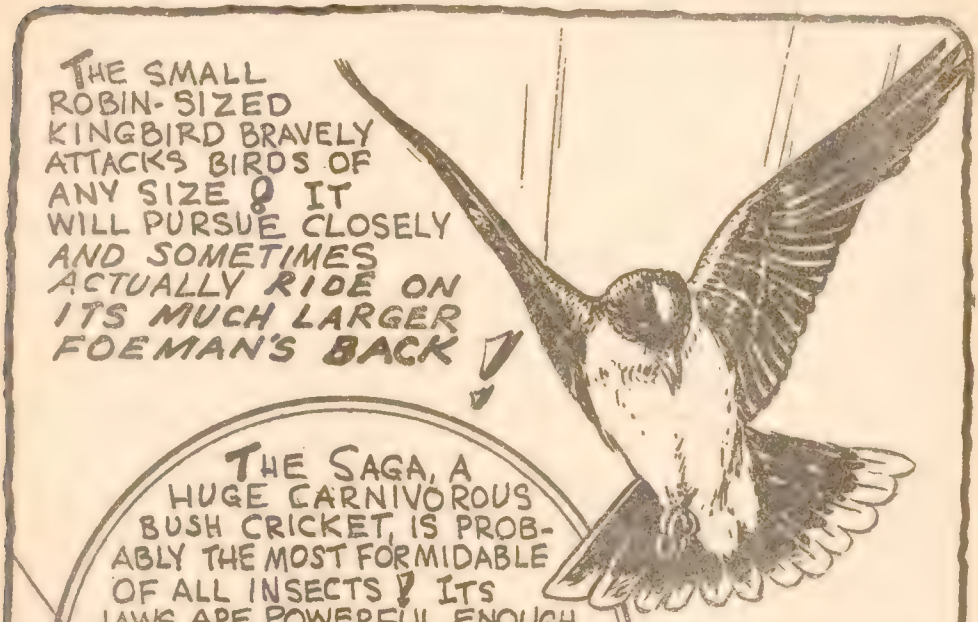
"Heh!" grinned Tete. "So you have law case, Armand?"

"Not this criminal one. My first case will go try to put an end to this permit racket for Dulat men. Jones can't get away with it now."

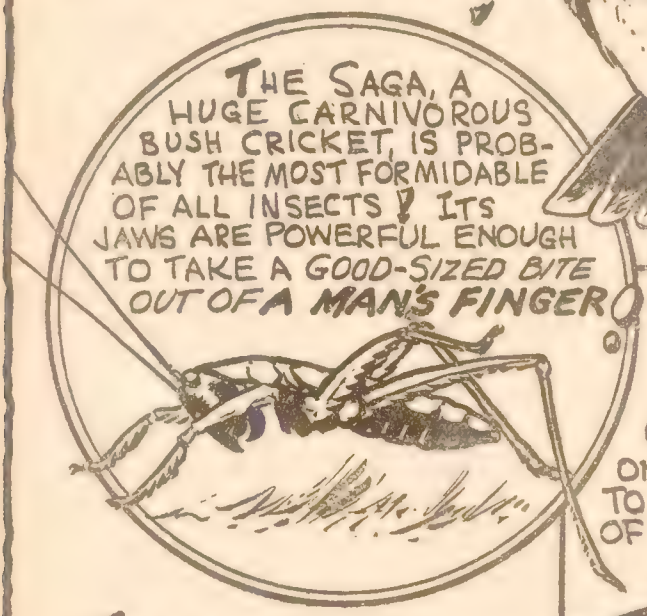
"Yo' win that case and we trap enough rats to mek yo' a big fur coat. I mean when it rain and water come back in Gentry land."

Curioddities By Will

THE SMALL ROBIN-SIZED KINGBIRD BRAVELY ATTACKS BIRDS OF ANY SIZE ! IT WILL PURSUE CLOSELY AND SOMETIMES ACTUALLY RIDE ON ITS MUCH LARGER FOEMAN'S BACK !



THE SAGA, A HUGE CARNIVOROUS BUSH CRICKET, IS PROBABLY THE MOST FORMIDABLE OF ALL INSECTS ! ITS JAWS ARE POWERFUL ENOUGH TO TAKE A GOOD-SIZED BITE OUT OF A MAN'S FINGER !

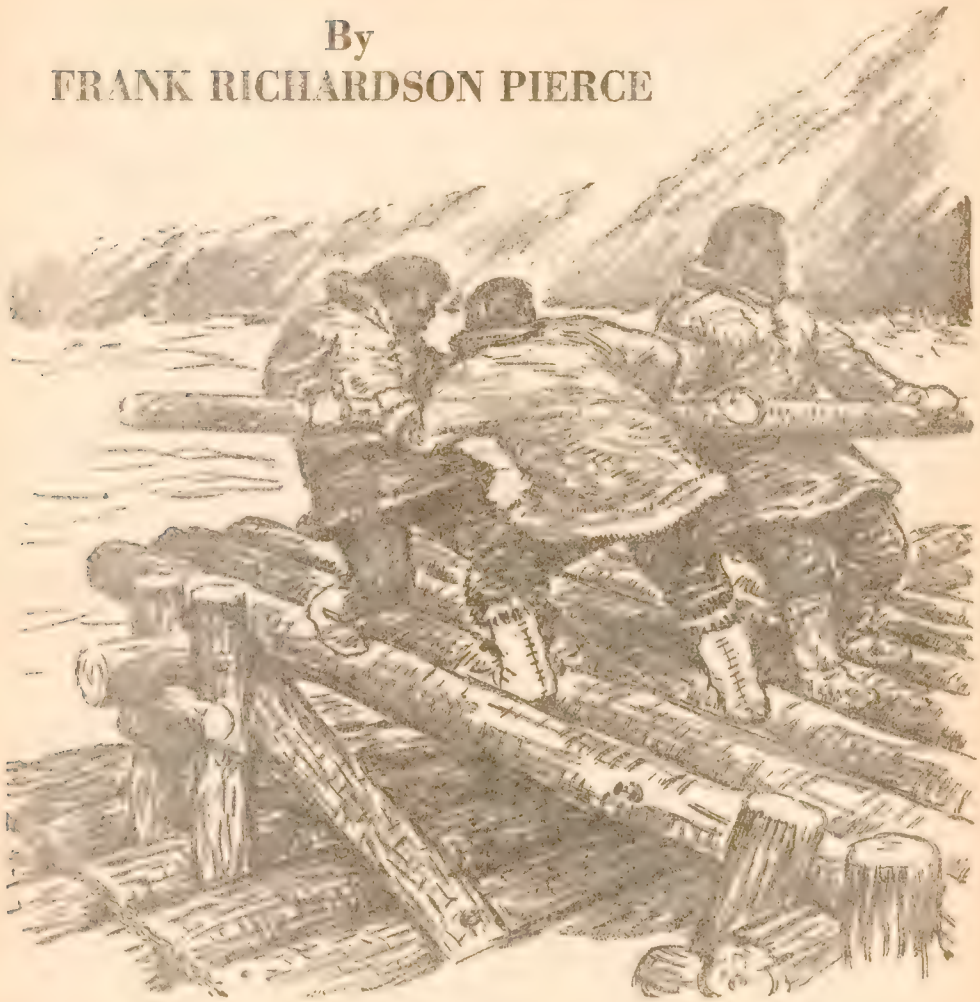


OPALS WERE ONCE BELIEVED TO BE A SOURCE OF MISFORTUNE !

THE LARGEST FRESH WATER GAME FISH IS THE MUSKELLUNGE ! SPECIMENS WEIGHING ABOUT 100 POUNDS HAVE BEEN CAUGHT !

No-Shirt McGee's

By
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE



ME AND Bulldozer Craig are putting away a square meal in the Westward Hotel coffee shop when the telephone call comes. I leave Bulldozer kidding with Jean the blond waitress and head for the telephone booth across the lobby. My bills are paid, I'm out of whiskey, I haven't tried to steal anybody's wife, so I can't figger who wants me. I'm kind of laughing because every time Bulldozer starts kidding Jean he gets the worst of it. That morning he had asked for cold mince pie for breakfast. The very thought of it makes the girl shudder. But she looks, and there's no mince pie, so she asks him how about a chocolate nut sundae. The thought of putting that on top of ham and eggs, plus flapjacks and syrup, makes Bulldozer shudder.

It just goes to show that when a cuss is at peace with the world and all smiles, there's a jinx lurking nearby to spoil everything. I go into the telephone booth and —up jumps the devil. It's Bob Jackson, in the CAA flight operations office at Merrill Field. "Hello, No-Shirt," he says, "you've been most everything in your time except a banker—"

"I was a banker in a card game at Nome until a cuss caught me with four aces," I

ONE-WAY TICKET

At His Age No-Shirt Felt, After All, a Man Couldn't Have His Own Funeral as a Steady Diet

answer. "So help me I didn't deal from the bottom of the deck."

"I know that you didn't," Bob answers. "Fred Yenny told me about it. Were you ever a logger or a sawmill man?"

"Yep!"

"Can you speak the Eskimo dialects?"

"Some of 'em, but what's that got to do with logging? Whoever heard of an Eskimo logger?" I yell. "Listen, Bob, my breakfast is getting cold and—"

"Nobody ever heard of an Eskimo logger," he answers, "but you're going to create several. The CAA wants to put up a station at Whale Bay. We need lumber, and the nearest timber is seven hundred miles up the McGee River. Say, was that named after you?"

"Yeah," I modestly admit. "You know how it goes. Somebody sees a bear prowling a creek and it's named Bear Creek. Or somebody's murdered and it's Murderer's Creek. Well, I drowned while crossing that stream and it's been called McGee River ever since."

"There are some fair-sized trees at the headwaters," Jackson grunts and continues. "They can be logged, floated down, sawed at Whale Bay and—presto! Lumber!"

"NO DICE," I answer. "All I can see is grief. Sorry!"

"Hmmm," Jackson says like a man studying three kings and a pair of aces. "If you don't turn the trick—and no one else has a chance—Pete Bramm will bring it in on

a schooner and charge the government ten prices."

"If the gov'ment can't lick Pete Bramm, then it's slipping," I tell Jackson. Bramm and I have had several run-ins, and he can be licked, but he's tough, and crooked as a snake. He's worth a million dollars and he didn't get it loaning money to needy folks at three percent.

"Put it this way, No-Shirt," Jackson says. "You know what we are doing up here. We need the station; construction season is short north of the Arctic Circle, and you're the huckleberry that can get the logs to us. Forget everything but the contribution-to-the-war angle."

Well, that's talking my language. "Okay, Bob," I answer.

When I first started flying in Alaska there were no aids to navigation, no landing strips to speak of, and those in the larger towns weren't anything to write home about. Pilots from the States would show up, look down, see what they had to land on, then break out with a violent case of the willies. The boys used river bars, moose pastures, or anything that was almost flat and free of trees and boulders.

WELL, the Civil Aeronautics Administration has put in landing strips, range stations and weather stations all over the country. Flying in Alaska is almost a sissy deal. You can set down on runways that'll take care of a Fortress loaded with bombs. And when the CAA is through, the weather will have one hell of a time sneaking in without getting caught.

After the war's over you'll hear more about what's been going on up there. Since Pearl Harbor me and Bulldozer have had chances to help the Army, Navy and Coast Guard, so why not the CAA? So I ask, "When do we get going, Bob?"

"Tomorrow. We'll fly you up to Whale Bay, pick up some young Eskimos and their gear, then head for the headwaters of the McGee River. Jack Jefford will pilot the NC14 and you can tell him where to set her down. Then—"

"Did you say Jack Jefford?" I ask. "Listen, I don't fly with that cuss. He hauled me a few times in his bush flying days. Every time I finished a flight it took the doctor three or four months to get my blood pressure down. And I never did get rid of the curl he put in my hair a couple of times."

"You landed without a crack-up, didn't you?" he asks. "Well; what more do you want?"

"Another thing, Bob, a fortune teller looked into her crystal ball about a year ago and she says, 'Beware, sourdough, of wings. I see a bird with a broken wing, tumbling to the ground. Walk, or ride on animals, or trains. Beware of the air. I see an open grave. I see—your funeral'."

"Do you believe that bunk?" he asks impatiently. "Some gal just had to make a living."

"Oh, I'll go," I told him, "but I won't fly with Jefford. Find somebody else. We'll be out to the field in the morning." Then I go back to my breakfast and break the news to Bulldozer.

He's brooding over his third cup of black coffee and is trying to make a wisecrack that'll silence Jean: "Eskimo loggers!" he exclaims. "You can't turn an Eskimo into a logger." Then he adds, "What about flying? You know what the fortune teller warned. She plainly saw death. And you know what that open grave was that she saw? A glacier crevasse. And nearby was the wings and one of the engines of a plane."

"I look at it this way, Bulldozer," I say paternally. "I've been on earth a long time. I saw the stampede of '98; saw automobiles, submarines, radios and planes come; fought in the Spanish-American War and World Wars I and II. What's left? Licking the Japs and commercial flights over the top of the world. The Whale Bay range station will play an important part in both. I'm going to have a hand in it, but I won't fly with Jefford."

Me and Bulldozer finish our breakfast and go out and buy a few things. I saw 'em build Anchorage back in the railroad days. I figgered it'd be quite a town in its time. but I never thought I'd see paved streets, stop signs and traffic lights. It's enough to make the '98ers turn over in their graves.

The next morning we load our outfits and ourselves into a cab and drive out to the flight operations office. The NC14 is out of the hangar and a crew of men are trying to get a small bulldozer through the door.

"Well, Bob, who's the pilot?" I ask.

"Jack Jefford," he answers. "This is a routine deal." If I'd've looked closer I'd've seen that he had his tongue in his cheek, but I'm looking at Bulldozer who is trying to impress the CAA girl behind the counter. Girls are scarce in that country and a man has to keep a lot of irons in the fire.

Then Jack comes in, smiling. "My old friend No-Shirt McGee!" he shouts, and shakes hands.

"As a friend," I tell him, "you're great, but as a pilot—phooie. I haven't forgotten the time you delivered fifty pounds of frozen meat to my mine. That bundle of meat knocked off the tool-shed roof, and you knew damned well I was in the tool-shed because I thought it was a safe spot. And what about—"

"That's all in the past," Jack cuts in, "I'm an instrument flier now. All I do is fly a bucket of bolts loaded with grub, women and kids to CAA stations. The old man is all for his pipe, his slippers and a place by the fire."

"And speaking of that damned pipe of yours," I yell, "I'd never have been airsick if you hadn't fogged up the plane with that pipe. Never did learn what you smoked in it. Dried tundra, probably."

I look around the room and see that a lady with a new baby, and a little girl clutching a doll is going along, so what the hell! Haven't I seen almost everything worth seeing in life? And what's left, except the job the CAA has handed me?

"SIT up front," Jackson says. It's a sort of a reward for simmering down. I climb on hands and knees over bulldozer, cross-cut saws, wire rope, drums of gasoline, grub and camp gear, and get to the cockpit passage. The seats in the NC14 have been removed, metal benches put along the sides, and a cargo floor laid down.

"Here's a seat for you, No-Shirt," Jack says, pulling down a sort of jump seat. "Meet Bill Hanson, co-pilot." I shake hands. "Here are headphones so that you can hear what is going on," Jack continues. "Now are you comfortable?"

"Either you know you're taking me to my funeral, or you're trying to make up for past sins," I growl. "You're as sweet as a warden to a condemned man. It wouldn't surprise me if you ordered up the 'Last Meal'."

So the lug points to four boxes of lunch —two for pilots; and two for me and Bulldozer.

We taxi out to the runway's end, *rev* the motors, then take off. Anchorage sinks under the wings, and I look down—slap-dab into a couple of open graves.

This turns out to be a "Milk Run" with stops at Farewell, McGrath, Galena and Unalakleet. Each place we drop off freight and take on more. We take off for Moses Point and when I look down there's Norton Sound ice about three hundred feet under the wings. "Hey, what's the idea?" I yelled at Jefford. "Get this thing up in the air a ways."

"No sense in wasting gasoline climbing, No-Shirt," he answers. "No mountains ahead of us, and we're going to set her down soon."

"Suppose the motors would quit?" I yell, my voice going kinda soprano. "We couldn't glide anywhere?"

"I'm afraid that'd be your funeral, No-Shirt," he answers.

By the time we land and take off from Moses Point I'm a nervous wreck, and Bulldozer who's been sleeping on cargo most of the time, gives me a dig in the ribs. "Get hold of yourself," he says, "or we'll get trimmed in this deal. I thought you were the cuss who'd done and seen everything in this world and didn't care whether you lived or died. But as soon as you see your funeral coming over the horizon why you——"

"Don't mention funerals," I yell. "Didn't a fortune teller warn me against planes. Then I have to fly with Jefford, of all people. That's flying right in the face of Providence. On top of that I see open graves in the Anchorage cemetery. I could almost see the Grim Reaper putting the finger on me and saying, 'This one is yours, No-Shirt McGee.' Then the hum of the motors seems to sing, 'Did you ever think as the hearse rolls by, that sooner or later both you and I will take a ride in that self-same hack, with never a thought of coming back'."

"Here," Bulldozer cut in, "have a drink of Moose Milk."

It's stuff they make in Alaska out of spud peelings, spoiled prunes and all that. An

Eskimo's mukluk, thrown in while the stuff is fermenting, helps. I take a stiff swig of it. It makes third degree burns down my throat and explodes in my stomach. I feel better.

At Nome airport it is lousy with Russians flying Lend Lease planes over the shuttle route through Siberia. I start to walk over and size up the Russians, but somebody discourages that. "If you want to be a hero," Jefford says, "take a truck and run into one of the bombers. But don't smash the wings. I'd like a couple of spares for NC14."

I turn pale. If Jack wants spare wings on hand, it looks as if he's figgerin' to lose one in a crack-up. Now if he did lose one, say while he was trying to land me on the McGee River, why a spare could be brought up on flat boats. "Bulldozer," I say in a low voice, "everything points to the toughest job we've ever tackled. I'd almost sooner parachute to McGee River than land with this cuss." I jerk my head toward Jefford.

"I'll string with him," he answers.

THEY'RE going to stay all night at Nome, so me and Bulldozer go to a hotel. And who do I see giving me a dirty look, but Pete Bramm. He makes me happy by not wanting to shake hands. "I know what you're up to, McGee," he snarls. "You are after the Whale Bay lumber contract. I offered to deliver lumber to the government at a fair price—"

Bulldozer glowers at Bramm. He's heard of a few deals the buzzard has put over. "That station is a *must,*" I answer. "The government will pay three prices to get lumber in there, but not ten. Otherwise the boys wouldn't have sold me on the idea of trying to get it to them."

"You!" he exclaims. "How're *you* going to land lumber in Whale Bay? You haven't got a schooner. You can't even charter one these days."

"He'll do it with mirrors," Bulldozer says.

Bramm is so worked up he can bite nails.

A McGee never throws his weight around, because about the time the McGees came down out of the trees and got to boasting that they were human beings, somebody came along and knocked their ears off. Since then a McGee goes about things quietly. Bramm knows there's something up or we wouldn't be here.

He walks over to a map that's on the wall, and being nobody's fool he looks for Whale Bay and the chances of getting lumber in there. Watching his head, which has plenty of good gray matter inside, I can see that he's checking the McGee River. When he gets up to the headwaters there's a little notation, "placer gold, lumber, fur, some platinum."

He whirls on me. "So you're going to raft it down, eh? You can't get away with it. First, you'll go broke flying in loggers and supplies. Next, you can never get a raft through the white water. Horse Tail Rapids will tear it apart. If you try to float logs one at a time, you'll have a crop of splinters when they reach salt water. Somebody in the CAA put you up to this, McGee. You're going to lose your shirt and I'm going to double my price of lumber laid down at Whale Bay."

"I can't lose my shirt," I answer. "I'm —No-Shirt."

"Hell, if you went around without a shirt like you did in your younger days you'd be a dead man," he mutters.

"Let's go to bed," Bulldozer says, "we've got some tough days ahead of us. And in a way Bramm's right. If you took off your shirt and exposed your two red corpuscles to the frosty air your friends would be sending wreaths and crediting you with a flock of noble impulses."

I don't go to bed. I browse around home and sure enough Bramm runs true to form.

He contacts some tough customers, picks up a loose jailbird here and there and sells them shares in the proposition. That's an old trick of his. If you sell a man an interest he fights harder to win. And if you lose, then you aren't out his wages.

When I turn in I tell Bulldozer, "This is going to be a brawl for fair."

"Fine," he says.

THEY wake us up at seven o'clock next morning. The plane takes off at eight. Nothing happens on the flight to Whale Bay. There's some mountains to cross, so Jack doesn't drag his wheels on the ice. The pack is heavy, but I can see leads. A schooner could get through a little later in

the season if a plane charted a course for her skipper to follow.

When we arrive at Whale Bay I can see the natives streaking it out to a section of cleared tundra. That's what passes for a landing strip in some parts of the North. Jack sets her down, but I don't utter any sighs of relief. We've got to fly a flock of miles yet.

Here Danny O'Brien meets me. He's a rugged Irishman and you always find him on the edge of the world doing some kind of a job. As soon as the plane's unloaded, he brings up a bunch of Eskimos. They are nice looking boys, with straight black hair that has a gloss to it. Their faces are dark, and clean. No traces of white blood. "Here are your loggers, No-Shirt," he says. "From now on, it's your funeral."

"Don't talk about my funeral," I yell at the top of my lungs.

"The job you're up against may not be your funeral," he answers, "but that music I hear ain't Boogie Woogie. Sounds more like a funeral march to me. Dum-de dum-dum-dum-dum dumdeeee-daaah." He starts humming.

They load themselves, saws, axes, sleeping bags, ropes and grub into the plane. "Hell, Jack!" I yell. "Is this all you're taking? The whole works doesn't weigh three thousand pounds, and you carry up to six thousand."

"It's like this, No-Shirt, when you know you've a bad landing ahead of you; when you have to look over the country and finally pick a place to set down, you don't want too much weight," he answers. Then he shuts the door and goes forward. I follow and sit down on the jump seat again.

"You don't realize how many lakes there are in Alaska until you get up in the air and look down. I wondered how the early-day prospectors got anywhere. The McGee River looks different from the air—more curves than a snake. At five thousand feet it looks like a paved highway."

FOUR hundred miles from Whale Bay we see timber, and Jack circles until the wheels are just clearing the tops. I get on my knees on the jump seat, support myself on the pilot's arm rests and get a better look. "Pick your timber, No-Shirt," he says, "and I'll set her down."

"Set her down where?" I sneer. There are a couple of brown patches blown clear of snow, about the size of a cowpuncher's handkerchief. They're right on the edge of the river bank. "You can't land on them."

"I can try," he answers.

The timber is about the right size for rafting, but it's in a kind of sheltered spot, which would make it hard to get down to the river. "That's the stuff you want," Jack says. "The wind hasn't twisted it out of shape. You can get some clear lumber out of it."

"Get this plane up in the air," I yell. "You don't have to inspect that stuff. My eyes are good enough. Ye gods! You'd think this was a jeep, made to go under branches and jump ditches."

"I don't want to set her down at the wrong place," he answers. "I want to be sure that's the timber we're looking for."

"That's it," I answer. "You don't need to look any more."

Bulldozer comes up. "I haven't seen a place to land, Jefford," he says.

By that time we've circled again and are crossing the McGee River canyon, which at this point is about three hundred feet deep. "Bulldozer," Jack says genially, "did you ever have a landing strip named after you?"

"Hell, no!" Bulldozer answers. "I'm not important enough for that." But he likes the idea so well that he gets rosy all over. "A man has to be a general or something, doesn't he?"

Jack indicates that brown pocket handkerchief on the edge of the river cliff. "We are about to make the first landing on Craig Field. Now—er—I want you men to go back and lie down on the floor, feet against bulkheads. If you can pad yourselves with sleeping bags, so much the better. Tell the native boys to flatten out and hang on."

He's approaching the "cowboy's handkerchief" again. Hanged if I see how he's going to set her down. The strip commences on the brink of the cliff. If he don't put the wheels down about where the brink begins, he's going to run out of ground. And if he comes in too low, we'll pile up against the cliff.

He sizes up the ground. It isn't too rough, but it ends in a hummock covered with brush. "Next time we land!" he says.

Me and Bulldozer go back, brace our feet

and sorta hug sleeping bags. The Eskimo boys—strong, stocky fellows—are on the floor, grabbing something that'll stay put. They seem to like it. Well, anybody that'll go after whales, armed with harpoons and floating in a skin boat, can take this in stride.

"He lands at about a hundred miles an hour," I tell Bulldozer. "I suppose if he slammed on the brake, the nose would dig into the dirt."

"Easy does it," Bulldozer answers. "I guess this is it! We can feel the speed slacken. The plane sorta sinks, then Jack guns her a little and she picks up speed, then she sinks again."

She touches the ground and shakes our teeth loose. "Hang on," Bulldozer warns, "there can't be much of Craig Field left." I shut my eyes, grit my teeth, and—the plane stops.

BULLDOZER leads the way out. There she is, on the rugged edge of nothing. Bulldozer is pale around the gills, and I can't seem to keep my knees still. Too much rubber in 'em. We hear a banging around in the plane. It's Jack and Bill shoving cargo toward the door. As soon as the plane is unloaded Jack jumps down and looks around. "The first and last landing on Craig Field," Bulldozer says.

"I'm glad I'm going downriver on a log raft," I tell Jack. "I wouldn't want to be in your bucket of bolts when you take off."

"Not the first and last landing," Jack answers. "We've got to supply you fellows. I think you're going to need a bulldozer."

"A bulldozer!" Bulldozer yells happily. "How're you going to get it here? And how'll you unload it even if you did manage to land it?"

"Love will find a way," I say with fine sarcasm.

We take picks and shovels and go to work. The sun has struck this spot and the dirt is soft down to the frost line. We knock off a few humps and shovel them into the low spots. Here and there's a rock that might give trouble and we roll that over the brink. The rocks plunge down, shattering the ice on a pool.

Jack takes off, pouring the coal into her. We can tell that he's using twenty-four-hundred horsepower instead of the usual twenty-one hundred. Just when we think she's going to crack up, the wheels clear.

Bulldozer wipes his brow. "Flying is sure a rugged business the minute you get away from the established fields in Alaska," he says. "But what the hell. They've got to have logs at Whale Bay and this is the only way to get 'em! No-Shirt, we can't let those guys down." He jerks his head toward the plane that has completed a circle and is thundering overhead.

"Let's make camp," I suggest, "then see what can be done about converting Eskimos into loggers."

ESKIMOS aren't what most people think they are. You think they hunt seal, walrus and polar bear. They do. You think they wear fur clothes; live in igloos made of driftwood and sod, with walrus-hide roofs. They do. You think it ends there, but it doesn't. They have plenty of mechanical sense.

They stand around while me and Bulldozer make an undercut, then start sawing. They jabber amongst themselves as we start wedging, and when we yell, "Timber-r-r-r!" there's a stampede.

The tree hits with a boom. Akadriak, who is the leader and business manager of the group, wants to know how I knew where the tree was going to fall. I show him how you direct the fall by the undercut and wedging.

The first tree they undercut looks as if a beaver had gnawed it, but they drop it fairly close to where they wanted it. Me and Bulldozer leave 'em the next day and start downstream. I can't get Pete Bramm's reference to Horse Tail Rapids out of what passes for my mind.

Ten miles from Craig Field we reach the upper end of the rapids. Bulldozer whistles. On every side, boulders protrude above the ice, for McGee River was frozen over during the low water period. Rivers drop before the freeze-up. "What's this like during the high water period?" Bulldozer asks. "It must seethe and boil through here something terrible. Look the way the walls are scoured. Look at that tree wedged between the canyon walls a good thirty feet above us. No-Shirt, no raft will live through the rapids."

"It's worse than I imagined," I answer.

"It's been years since I've seen McGee River. You're right. Bramm was right, too. Even a raft would come out of the canyon—splinters."

"This will be a blow to Akadriak," Bulldozer says. "I heard those Eskimos talking. Bramm has been bringing up lumber on his schooner for years. He trades it to them for ivory, and furs."

"And they pay five times what it's worth even in the Arctic," I growl. "But it's the only lumber within reach and they're helpless."

"Akadriak likes the idea of floating logs downstream and cutting them into lumber," Bulldozer continues. "He could load the planks onto umiaks and peddle them to other villages. They're all steamed up over the idea." He scowls at the canyon. "If there was a sort of canal lock at the lower end of the canyon the loads could be floated over the boulders."

"Hey!" I yell. "That gives me an idea! It isn't the boulders that are dangerous. It's the speed of the water passing amongst them. If we slow down the river, rafts could pass through without trouble."

"Swell!" Bulldozer says, full of sarcasm. "We'll hold back the river with a plank—you on one end and me on the other."

We work our way below the rapids and I squint at an overhanging cliff. "Wise guy," I suggest, "a few cases of powder will knock that overhang into the river. The dam will stop the flow long enough for rafts to get through. Once through, we'll wait until the dam goes out then continue."

"If you aren't carried along with a solid wall of water and dashed to pieces in some lower canyon," Bulldozer reminds me.

We camp in the canyon for the night and next morning, while we're eating breakfast, Bulldozer hears a plane's motors. "Hell, Jack's back already!" he exclaims.

"It sounds like a single motor job to me," I tell him, "but the echoing through the canyon makes it hard to tell just what it is."

We've managed to make a fire out of driftwood that stranded on the rocks when the river dropped. The air has a kind of smoke haze from wall to wall, but we see a single motor job about a mile up. It's headed for Craig Field.

"Bramm looking things over," Bulldozer says. "What other plane would fly into this country?"

"It might be a bush pilot coming in to fly out a trapper and his furs. Or he might be bringing in a miner," I answer, "but my guess is that it's Bramm."

An hour later we hear the plane coming back. It's low this time. The pilot flies back and forth above the canyon, testing the air, then down he comes. It is a cub type plane and for a minute I think he's going to land on the ice, but he isn't *that* crazy. He clears our heads by thirty feet, and I see Peter Bramm, face against the windshield sizing us up.

"No-Shirt!" Bulldozer says. "Do you suppose he's figgered out what we're up to?"

"He knows Horse Tail Canyon is our main hurdle, though there's another bad one three miles from Whale Bay," I answer. "And Bramm wasn't born yesterday. Let's get back to Craig Field."

AKADRIAK was in a high state of excitement when we arrived. In his precise mission-school English he said, "Captain Bramm, whom I do not like, landed. He said we had better forget this logging nonsense and go back to our walrus hunting, trapping and ivory carving. He said that unless we did so that it might not be worth while for him to come to our village with supplies."

The native's face clouded slightly. The village can hardly afford that. When you're in a remote spot you'll pay most anything for necessities. "What did you tell him?" I ask.

"I told him that if he stopped coming to Whale Bay that we would float logs down the McGee River, cut them into lumber and build our own trading schooner," he answers. "I told him that I saw no reason why Eskimos shouldn't become traders, too. For a minute he looked very thoughtful, and then—he looked mean. I think that he will—what is it that they say in books? Oh, yes, I think that there will be dirty work at the crossroads."

"And how do you feel about that, Akadriak?" I ask.

"I shall be at the crossroads," he answers quietly. "That is if you stick with me."

"And what do you think about the chances of me and Bulldozer sticking with you?" I ask.

A faint smile brightens his serious face. "I stuck my neck out, didn't I?" he answers.

He goes back to his logging operation again and Bulldozer says, "Well, No-Shirt, you should be happy. Not only have you got a fight on your hands with an old enemy, but you can carry a torch for a cause." The big lug is thoughtful for several seconds. "You know I'm sorta hoping that Akadriak's people do build that schooner. A little competition will force Bramm's kind to lower prices within reason, and to bring in better stuff."

I wander over to look at the logs. The Eskimos have bucked them so evenly you'd think they were working with precision instruments, where a thousandth of an inch is important.

Bulldozer puts in the rest of the day blazing a trail down to a split in the canyon wall where there's a pool in the warm season. Akadriak joins us at the pool. "You can't drag logs down *that* slope," he says. "It is one way of breaking your neck."

"It's the only way to get 'em down," Bulldozer answers. "You'd better not buck the rest of the trees, Akadriak. The tops and limbs dragging will act as a brake."

A couple of days later Jack shows up. Craig Field now has a wind sock—a red streamer made from the leg of Bulldozer's long-handled underwear.

Jack sizes up things, circling several times, then he comes in. Just when I think he's going to lose his wheels on the brink of the cliff, they clear and touch. His flaps come down with a snap to help brake the plane. "Boy!" Bulldozer exclaims. "She's loaded this time! He can't stop her—he can't—"

We hold our breaths and—she stops.

Jack slides back the window and grins down at us. "You used up most of your luck that time," I yell. "Let that be a lesson to you!"

Bulldozer opens the door and you should see the junk inside—a bulldozer, wire cable and drums of fuel, plus fittings for building steering gear, and bolts.

When things are unloaded Jack says, "How about giving me a little more runway? No-Shirt is right. I've used a lot of luck on this deal. One more arrival and departure like the last one will turn Bill into a nervous wreck."

Akadriak and the others watch Bulldozer go into action with the bulldozer, scraping off humps and pushing tons of dirt into depressions. He finished by scraping out a place for the plane to turn around at the runway end.

He hooks onto a tree and starts down the slope. Twice the tree rolls and half drags the bulldozer around, but Bulldozer fights the load every inch of the way. Akadriak follows at a safe distance, and is popeyed. I can tell that he expects to gather Bulldozer's remains.

At the bottom the big cuss gets off of the machine, looks up to where we're standing and shakes his head, then he bellows, "No-Shirt, you get me into the damnedest messes. This is supposed to be your funeral, and if I'm not careful it'll be mine."

Akadriak rides to the top with him. "I think I can run this machine," he says, "if you'll show me how."

"Here's the deal," Bulldozer says with enthusiasm. He's nuts about the bulldozer and the things it can do. The idea of converting an Eskimo to the cause gives him more glow than a shot of moose milk. He starts showing Akadriak the meaning of the levers.

"Things seem to be going okay up here," Jack says, "why not fly back with me and look over the river, No-Shirt. Floating the rafts downstream is your funeral, you know, and you'd better look over the bad spots below Horse Tail Rapids."

"Okay," I agree. "By the way, Jack, I'm going to need five hundred pounds of powder to shake up a little dirt below the rapids."

"I'll fly it in for you," he agrees.

WE TAKE off without too much trouble, and head for the Arctic. "Listen to this," he says, handing me a headset.

A weather report is coming in. Warm rains and a south wind are on their way to Alaska. That means that the break-up is coming. Break-up means that the ice pack swings North and with the help of a plane Bramm might find leads through the ice to Whale Bay. It's a finish fight now, and

somebody—the Craig-McGee combination or Bramm—is going to lose a fight and a lot of money.

I get a pretty good picture of McGee River. I make a sketch of the bad spots to check, later, against a map of the river. I might've known there was a catch in Jack's kind offer. After we've been at Whale Bay three days a single motor plane comes in.

"Here's your powder, No-Shirt," Jack says. "Seven hundred pounds—two hundred more than you ordered. The day is young, the pilot is tired, so think I'll fly you and the powder to the Rapids."

"Hell, aren't you going to take the big plane?"

"No," he answers. "Couldn't land it near the Rapids."

"Yes, and you'll probably try to set it down on a dime," I mutter. "Okay. I'll say it first, it's my funeral."

We get into the plane, climbing over cases of powder, and he indicates the co-pilot's seat. "Strap yourself in, No-Shirt," he says genially, "and I'll start the windmill turning."

The motor roars, and it's practically in our laps. He hands me a package. "Dynamite caps, No-Shirt. Practically like old times, eh? If it looks like a crack-up, toss 'em out."

"Why, you——" I'm fighting mad, but you can't do much in a moving plane, with dynamite caps in your lap.

He flies low, looking for game, and sort of picking landing spots in case the motor quits. We go down into the canyon in several places to check on rapids, and before I know it he's zooming over Horse Tail Rapids. We climb out and circle around the brink. "Better give up," I suggest, "and land me at Craig Field. We'll take this powder overland."

"It'd take weeks," he answers. "See those lateral canyons? You'd have to climb into 'em and out of 'em. It's too late to go downriver over the ice from Craig Field. The break-up might trap you. I think I can set her down where that new grass is growing."

The sun had struck a sheltered spot, thawed the ground, and new grass was springing up everywhere. We come in, almost go down, then he sees a rough stretch and changes his mind. Up we go and back we come.

"Are you strapped in good?" he asks. "And are you holding those caps gently, like a mother with her baby? Good. Hang on!" A few seconds before the wheels hit I see a ditch. Last year's grass has covered it, so it looks like the rest of the ground."

I open the window and heave out the caps, and as they hit and explode the wheels clear the ditch, hit on the edge and we bounce. Down we come, with the dynamite cases bouncing around. The plane noses down, then a wing starts to dig in and changes its mind. Finally we stop.

"Not bad, No-Shirt," he says. "It's a good thing you threw out the caps. But what'll you do now? You can't set off a blast. You may need 'em before I come out this way again."

I fish around and pull two caps out of my mouth. I wrap them in a handkerchief while he's still gasping. "You carried 'em in your mouth, No-Shirt?"

"Yes," I answered. "I figgered if my head was jarred enough to set off the caps, I was done for, anyway."

WE UNLOAD, stow the powder in a cave, and he takes me off to Craig Field. When we wake up next morning, it is raining. He was right. We'd never have taken that powder over the ice.

Before noon, water is running three feet deep over the ice, and as the ice breaks up in the small, side-streams, it floats into McGee River, and the old grind and roar of moving ice breaks the long winter silence.

I never get tired of watching the break-up, but this year I join Bulldozer on the edge of the pool. They've cut smaller trees for rollers and are dragging logs onto the rollers. Bulldozer has rigged up blocks and hooks, so that the logs can be brought up snug. Eskimos with augers are boring holes near the end of the logs. Wire cables are run through the holes. This keeps the logs together. Every few yards a cross log is lashed to give the raft strength. Near the end, they construct a high platform with bolts and short sections of logs.

Here a sort of rudder in the form of a sweep with a big blade is installed. Men on the platform, pushing and pulling can steer the logs after a fashion. More cable is

wound around the raft so that if one section breaks there'll be others to keep the raft together.

We all know that once we board that raft and start downstream, we're riding on a one-way ticket. When the raft is finished, Bulldozer comes up with the bulldozer and shoves. It takes about all the power the machine has to get that raft going, but once it starts it gains momentum until it hits the river. Bulldozer has run a chain from the raft to a boulder, and now as it swings round in the stream the chain stops it, and it drifts up to the bank. Mostly the river is clear, but every few minutes an ice mass will drift past.

By now Akadriak can handle the bulldozer first rate, and the other Eskimos can make an undercut almost as good as a Puget Sound logger. Akadriak comes to me and says, "This is your contract. You're paying our wages. If you lose the rafts, we still get paid?"

"That's right," I answer. "You can't lose, but me and Bulldozer can be taken to the cleaners plenty."

"From now on," he suggests, "we're partners. We'll pay you for the grub we eat. We'll all work together piling up logs beside the pool."

"That would be a cold deck of logs," I explain.

"Then when you dam the river we'll roll the logs into the river," he continues. "They will drift through the rapids without damage. Some will be lost below the rapids. Some will be shattered, but those that get through we'll sell and split fifty-fifty?"

"Who'll we sell 'em to?" I ask.

"We'll sell 'em to me—Akadriak Lumber Company," he answers.

"Hop to it," I answer.

LEAVING the Eskimos to do their logging, me and Bulldozer make our way to the dynamite cache. "Now tell me," he says, "just how this is going to work out."

"First we dig a hole here," I tell him. "We'll load the hole and pile clay on top of it. The explosive force is downward. That blows out the bottom of the hole, which is part of the overhang. Tons of dirt and rock spill into the river. This mass will will be followed up by a slide or two. Taking advantage of the gentle current, created because backwater has slowed the force of the stream, we float through the dangerous water. We drill holes in the canyon wall, drive in steel pegs, and tie up to the pegs. We're held there when the dam goes out."

"You hope—" Bulldozer cuts in. "If something goes haywire and we go downstream on the crest of the flood, that'll be *our* funeral."

"When the water is down to normal level we'll cut loose and go downstream," I conclude. "Like a boat leaving the locks after it's been lowered."

We're loading the hole when Bulldozer hears a plane coming. "It might be Jack," he says, "but he's no reason for coming up this way."

That fresh pile of dirt we've dug on the cliff brink must be visible a long way from a plane. We drop into the hole, drag tools in after us, and hold our breath. The plane sort of circles over the spot, banking sharply so the passenger can look down and see what's going on. Flat on my back, I look up. And there's Peter Bramm looking down.

"That settles it," Bulldozer says. "He knows what we're up to. A man digs a hole in this country for certain things—mines, graves, to plant trees or something like this. He knows this is a hell of a spot for a grave, tree or mine. We'll have to leave a guard here, and you'd better be it. I can get back and forth easier than you can. That last canyon we crawled out of had you puffing like a steam engine. I'll send one of the native boys to tell you when we're ready."

He crawls out of the hole and heads back to Craig Field. The days drag. I watch the ice go out, growling, grinding, damming up and breaking. The Rapids' rocks stop things cold for twenty hours, then all hell breaks loose and water and ice spread for twenty miles over the low country below the canyon. Overhead the warm rain comes in torrents.

THE river slowly drops back to normal, the rain eases slightly and then an Eskimo shows up. "Two rafts all ready," he says, "and lotsa logs. Bulldozer say, 'Tell No-Shirt do his stuff!' "

I cut a length of fuse and insert one end

in a cap. I crimp the rim of the cap to the fuse with my teeth, which same makes the Eskimo kid have a chill. I place the cap into a hole that I've made in a stick of powder. Tie it tight and shove it down with the rest of the powder. I repeat the performance with the other cap, cutting the fuses a different length. The idea is that the blasts go off at different times. The first one knocks the bottom out of things, and the second starts the slides.

I fill the holes to the brim with clay, which is heavy and tamps things down, then I light the fuses and give the hard rock man's time-honored warning cry, "Fire! Fire!"

WE LEG it a quarter-mile before the first blast let go. It's as pretty a sight as ever I did see. The overhang sorta shudders, then seems to float in the air, then down it goes. It hits the river and columns of water leap in every direction. The river froths in, as if to push everything out of the way, then the second blast let's go and down come the slides.

"We've stopped her cold," I yell.

Slowly the flood backs up. You can see white water frothing over small rocks, then the rising water smothers it. And so it goes, gradually taming the toughest stretches. Now when we first come to the river it's frozen, and it's as still as a tomb. Then the break-up fills the canyon with thunder and now slowly, surely it's getting quiet again.

Hours pass, I doze, and then the Eskimo shakes me. "Logs come!" Evidently, Bulldozer has pushed the cold deck into the stream. There's a line of logs bobbing among the boulders, many of them overlapping.

The first raft comes into sight, then the second. Bulldozer yells at me, "Better ride the second raft, No-Shirt," he advises. "Akadriak is on it and he doesn't know this river stuff."

I wave that I understand, and he bobs by. Akadriak's raft bumps the rock I'm standing on and I jump aboard, grab the sweep and head toward the canyon wall. We take a turn around a boulder and stop the raft. The idea is to stay just downstream from the bad rocks and not get too near the dam, because when it goes out the suction in that region is going to be terrific.

Standing on the high platform on the rafts, me and Bulldozer start drilling holes in the wall. It's the old hard-rock miner's trick of holding a drill, turning it frequently, while a strong, young guy swings a hammer.

A half hour later a shudder runs through the raft. I look at Bulldozer and he's looking at me. We've both mined long enough to know the feeling of a blast. We look at the dam and it's giving away. He yells, "Somebody blasted the base of the dam. She may not hold."

If the crest goes below the surface it is a lead pipe cinch that it won't hold. The water spilling over will tear it apart.

Yes, the crest is slowly sinking near one wall as pressure at the bottom pushes out the dirt loosened by the blast. "Get another rope around that boulder," I yell. Bulldozer is throwing a rope over a couple of smaller boulders. We know they won't hold forever, but if they'll just hang on until some of the flood's force has spent itself, we've a chance. One of the Eskimo boys looks at a shelf a hundred feet away, and figgers that he can flounder that far. I point to hunks of bark floating on the surface. They suddenly start spinning around little whirlpools then go under.

"Don't do it, Sapsuck," I warn, "you'll be pulled under."

"I thought I might get the fellow who blasted the dam," he answers.

"No chance," I answer. "You see——"

"He thinks that he's safe because all of us will be swept downstream," Sapsuck argues mildly. "Now if I could get onto the bank he would be surprised. I don't think he has taken much trouble to cover his tracks."

"Sapsuck wants to be a deputy United States marshal," Akadriak explains. "We have an Eskimo girl, a graduate nurse. Another hopes to take up typing and telegraphy so that she can be a CAA communicator. I wish to be a lumberman, and so it goes. We want to play a greater part in running our affairs."

"The government is willing," I tell him. "All that you have to do is to qualify."

The crest suddenly sags and the water tumbles over, muddy and roaring. I watch

the ropes. They strain as the current strengthens. The logs, sucked into the current, form a long, twisting streak. They flip, end over end, like corks as they go over the dam. The ropes are as tight as fiddle strings now, then suddenly the boulders roll and the ropes come off.

As the raft wallows by Bulldozer's I can tell by his face that he thinks this really is my funeral. "Good luck!" I yell, then I turn to the boys. "Get hold of this sweep's handle. Push when I push, and pull when I pull. We've got a lot of leverage on it, and we may be able to handle it. Don't tumble off of the platform in the excitement."

Then we're ten feet from the brink. I catch a glimpse of the flood going downstream. The surface is dotted with logs. Some of them are going around like pinwheels and others are shucked down and tossed up. I see one hurled to a ledge. It rolls a couple of times and stays there.

The raft bucks, then goes under. Water swirls around the platform and for a moment we're ankle deep. We can't steer. All we can do is hang on.

As we wallow by a lateral canyon, I catch a glimpse of a man's head and shoulders above a boulder. Water has gone up the canyon until a small, narrow bay has formed.

WE HIT a boulder and glance off, then roll into a low wall. Sapsuck jumps, lands on the wall, then braces his feet. He's holding a sealskin line in his hand, and as we float on, his pack is yanked from the raft. He hauls it in, hand over hand, waves his hand, and Akadriak says, "I was afraid he'd do that. I think he saw something."

"He did," I answer. "A man's head and shoulders above a boulder. Pull! Pull like hell or we'll be going downstream sideways. We hit a boulder and spin around, then smash into the canyon wall. Most of the fellows go down. The current catches the sweep and our end swings, knocking a native cold. I manage to hang on until the others can get to their feet. The raft slides onto a boulder and hangs there a full minute. We're all breathing hard and wondering what'll happen next."

Bulldozer's raft comes around the bend, heading straight for our raft. "We're all gone to hell!" Akadriak yells, forgetting his precise English.

Bulldozer is one of the strongest men I've ever known. He puts a bend in the sweep that I thought would snap it in half, and turns the raft toward the canyon wall. It passes so close I could've jumped aboard. It disappears around a bend, and the next thing I know we're free and fighting the sweep. We crash into the wall and scrape along. The bark from the logs goes, and then the walls eat into the clean, hard wood. I'm glad the cables run through each log in several places, because this kind of treatment is going to wear the strands to shreds.

"Get ready to pick up men from the other raft," I yell. "The canyon ahead is a bad one at this speed. They may have wrecked."

We round the bend, banking like a plane because the water has piled up against the wall. The logs go out of sight and again foam rolls over the platform. The sweep is smothered in the froth, then we straighten up. From wall to wall the stream ahead is clear. The rocks are somewhere under the surface.

We get a couple of jolts, but that's all. That speck ahead is Bulldozer. "Take it easy," I pant. "We've got a long day ahead of us and plenty of bad water."

THE boys relax. Akadriak handles the sweep. He has caught onto the simpler tricks. Another bend, and black fangs protruding above the surface. Bulldozer is hung up and now it's our turn to work clear of him. As we come opposite he bellows, "Waterfall! Ahead!"

I can hear it now, then we get a glimpse ahead and the canyon is filled from bank to bank with mist. The sweep is secured with a rope, and I yell to let it drag. "Everybody down on the platform! Hang on!" We drop onto our stomachs and grab.

The front end drops and I can feel the center of the raft strike solid rock. Then our bodies whip around and spray drenches us in torrents. Akadriak's grip is torn loose and he vanishes in a smother of suds. Suddenly we're in a stretch of water streaked with foam, but fairly quiet.

A voice comes from astern and I see Akadriak hanging to the sweep. It's been many

a long day since I roped a steer, but I throw a wide loop and hope for the best. He could never crawl up the sweep.

I miss his shoulders, but he throws up a hand and the loop catches around his wrist. He lets go of the sweep and we haul him aboard. He stands on the platform, whipping his arms about and stamping his feet. The chill of icy water has gone deep.

A mile below I work the raft into a pool. It hits hard enough to spill everybody off the platform, but it sticks into the bank. A native boy jumps ashore and ties up to a boulder. I take soundings. The pool is deep. There isn't a chance that we'll be stranded when the river goes down.

"We'll go ashore," I tell the boys, "and dry out. We'll cook ourselves a square meal. And it wouldn't hurt any for each of us to offer up a little prayer of gratitude."

"And a prayer for Sapsuck," Akadriak adds. "I think he is going after the man who blew up the dam."

"And one for Bulldozer," I think, and then he comes around the bend and bobs on by us.

"We'd better get some sleep, too," I advise. "We've hundreds of miles ahead of us and that means long, hard days."

WHEN we wake up, the pool is full of logs, and the stream is down to normal. I put the boys to work shoving the logs into the current while I cook a hot meal. An hour later we get the big raft into the stream.

In a couple of hours we pass a spot where Bulldozer has camped. One of the boys rolls stranded logs into the water, and boards the raft again. That's the beginning of days of floating stranded logs, steering the raft through canyons, sleeping and eating. Ten days out from Craig Field we pass Bulldozer who is stranded again. That same day a plane flies overhead and when we come opposite a bar seven miles downstream, there's the plane. Jack's unloaded a cargo of grub and is waiting for us to show up.

We strand the raft and hold a reunion. Before it breaks up, Bulldozer joins us. "No-Shirt," Jack advises, "you'd better let Bulldozer and Akadriak handle the rafts and fly with me to Whale Bay. I've flown in a knocked-down saw mill which needs to be assembled. Bramm's schooner, with a deckload of lumber, is at Nome. He's watching the ice and as soon as a plane can find leads enough, he's going to shove the schooner through. He could be landing lumber ashore here in about two weeks. And these logs are a good two weeks from Whale Bay, even if you have luck. There's some bad water ahead of you yet. What do you think?"

"I think I'd better go with you," I answer. "I've a hunch that the contractor who is building the station at Whale Bay, is all on our side, but with him every day counts, and he'll have to buy the first available lumber."

"We'll have to get by on less sleep," Bulldozer says. "No reason why we can't keep these logs moving twenty-four hours a day—sleep on the platform, and eat on the platform. S'long, No-Shirt. Get that mill to running and we'll get the logs there."

I take off with Jack, but he heads upriver. "Keep your eye out for a couple of guys on foot," he says.

Fifty miles upriver he suddenly sets her down on a bar. "I think I saw 'em," he says. "Not sure."

Twenty minutes later a makeshift raft comes around the bend and lands on the bar. The first man ashore is a tough-looking customer who looks the worse for wear. Behind him comes Sapsuck, who has ambitions to be a deputy United States marshal. "I chased him over a lot of back country," the Eskimo says, "and when I finally cornered him, he pulled a gun on me. I had to rough him up a little before he'd drop it. Since then he's been quiet enough."

"Akadriak told me that you were looking for the cuss who blew up the dam," Jack says. "He thought it might be a good idea if we took a look-see. I'm glad we did."

"It's been a long walk and tough rafting," Sapsuck answers. "But this gent confessed, so it's worth it."

Jack cuts across the mountains on the way back, swings out over the ice pack, and sure enough there's Bramm's plane hunting leads. It's bad enough to fly over ice in a twin-motored job, but in a single-motored plane it's asking for it. I'm glad when we land at Whale Bay.

Three or four young Eskimos who want to be sawmill men, help me set up the mill. When the job's done we try it out on a tree that drifted down the previous year. "Nice little mill," McNaughton, the construction superintendent says, "and it's too bad your raft isn't here. Bramm, I'm afraid, is going to win by a nose."

"What!" I yell. "Is his schooner in sight?" I grab a pair of binoculars and leg it up to a headland back of the bay. There's an ice barrier between the bay and the schooner. She's lowered sails and is using her motor. Even as I watch, she backs off and takes a run at the ice. Her bow heaves upward, but the ice is too thick. Instead of smashing through to a lead, she slips back. She goes astern, builds up momentum, hits the spot weakened by the other charges, and goes through. There's more ice ahead of her, but there's also room to build up momentum and crash into it. And her bows were built for crashing ice.

I turn and look the other way. I can see open stretches of McGee River for nearly ten miles, but there's no sign of the raft. "Well, Sapsuck," I say, "you've made good. You brought in your man, and the Mounted Police never did any better than that. But —Akadriak has lost out."

"And you've lost money too, No-Shirt," he says.

"That isn't important. I've got other irons in the fire. I can stand the loss, though I hate to take a beating from Bramm. But with Akadriak and his boys—well, well, Alaska is growing and they want to grow with it. Defeat won't lick 'em. They've got good stuff. But defeat will set them back and give Bramm a hold they can't break."

"I understand," Sapsuck says.

We go back to the village. It's raining cats and dogs and I go into Sapsuck's igloo to dry out. It is clean. Walrus hides cover the floor. A seal-oil lamp keeps the room warm. His mother is chewing hide to soften it up for a water boot. His old man is smoking a pipe. We all squat on the floor. There's a hand sewing machine against the wall, and right alongside of it a radio that'll get Tokyo Rose in Japan and name bands in the States.

That radio is progress. So is the big outboard motor I saw in the entry as I came into the igloo. They cut out a hole in an umiak, built a sort of well near the stern, lower the motor down through the well until the propeller bites into the water, and away they go. The village has long had a native store, and now it's lumber and logging that they want. I get an idea that might help, but I keep it to myself. After all, the Whale Bay natives must stand on their own hind legs, do their own thinking, if possible. I hear Jack take off in the big plane. He'll be bringing in generators, transmitters, panels and all the other gear that goes with a range station.

The village is mighty quiet when I go out the next morning. Five miles offshore the schooner is smashing through the final ice barrier. McNaughton joins me. As she clears, she keeps driving ahead and ten minutes after the anchor goes down, she's swinging heavy boats over the side and the ship's carpenter is bolting two of them beam to beam and laying a deck.

"Tough," McNaughton growls. "You fellows gambled your money and lives, and Bramm wins." A sling-load of lumber goes over the side and drops easily onto the deck. Another follows, then sailors lash it down. A motor boat, with Bramm in the stern, hooks on and starts up the bay. Progress is slow because it is going against the McGee River current.

"Listen!" McNaughton says suddenly. "Jefford is coming! Hear the motors! Coming with that equipment and no place to store it. And it's raining again!"

"That isn't Jefford!" I yell. "Those are outboard motors you hear. Come on!"

We run to a little hill that gives a close-up view of the river and bay. A umiak, powered with an outboard motor, is coming full speed downstream, dragging two logs behind it. As it rounds the point and enters the bay, it comes within a quarter mile of Bramm's lumber. Sapsuck turns on the power and gradually overhauls the trader.

I heard Bramm's voice bellow, "You damned Eskimo that ain't lumber. That's logs."

Akadriak, steering, doesn't answer. I leg it down to the sawmill and yank off the walrus hides that've been protecting the machinery from the rain. I start the Diesel

motor and get the machinery turning over. A couple of Eskimo boys take a cable down to the beach and as the first log strands, one of them drives a dog into it, takes a turn with the cable and signals me. I turn on the power and the log, rolling heavily, is snaked onto the carriage.

Everybody in the village is around the mill now. Kids in their mother's parka hoods, and several old folks are leaning on canes.

I run the log through the saws and take off a slab. Back she comes and off comes a board. I trim the edges and the first lumber, cut to size, slides over the rollers into McNaughton's hands.

BRAMM, fighting mad, comes running up, blowing like a steam engine. "You can't get away with that deal," he pants. His face is purple and he's fighting mad. "I've brought in all the lumber you'll need. What they've got is a couple of logs—"

"My contract provides that the lumber will be supplied," McNaughton says. "And it's being supplied. It makes no difference to me whether they have two logs or a boom of logs, so long as the boards come as I need them."

"We've two rafts coming," Akadriak says. "Besides that, men in a umiak are going upriver to float logs that have been stranded along the way. We'll have enough logs to supply lumber for several stations."

Bramm grabs McNaughton's arm. "Let's talk business. I'll make you a price—"

"If you hadn't put up your figure in the first place, mister," McNaughton answers, "these boys wouldn't have gone into the logging business."

"And that isn't all," Akadriak says. "The man you hired to blow up our dam has talked. When he gets into court I think he'll blame everything onto you to save his own skin. But that has nothing to do with the price of lumber. I know what you paid for that deck-load in Seattle. That's what I'll give you for it!"

"I'll see you in hell first," Bramm bellows. "Why the freight alone—"

"My people have paid that freight over and over again in the past, Akadriak cuts in. "Take my price or—take the lumber back to Nome." He looked thoughtful. "Do you know, I believe we can undersell you at Nome—"

He roars something and turns away. I watch him, and he watches the contractor and the saws. He's looking for a chance to hang a damage claim on somebody. The boys in the umiaks keep single logs coming to the saws, then the second day Bulldozer's raft comes into sight. The supply problem is licked.

"So we won?" Bulldozer says. "Why didn't you think of umiaks and outboard motors?"

"I did, but I was in hopes the natives would think of that angle. They've got to use their brains if they outguess the Bramms who come into the Arctic. Well, Sapsuck thought of it. And Akadriak is making a deal with the CAA to leave that bulldozer at Craig Field. As I figure it, we'll make cost plus ten percent profit on the deal, and the Eskimos are in the logging game."

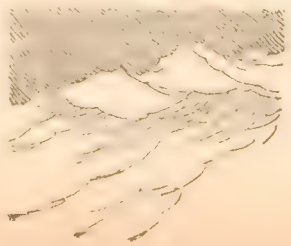
"What about Bramm's load of lumber?"

"I think he must've sold out to Akadriak," I answer. "He seems to be hard at work with a paint brush."

Bulldozer is thoughtful for several seconds. "How soon are you going to consult another soothsayer about your future? If she predicts your funeral, I'd like to be in on it. This is the first funeral I ever enjoyed."

I take a long breath. At my age a man can't have his own funerals as a steady diet. It's too hard on his constitution. I go over and look at the board Akadriak is painting. It reads:

"AKADRIAK LUMBER COMPANY."



Plantation Guns

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Part III

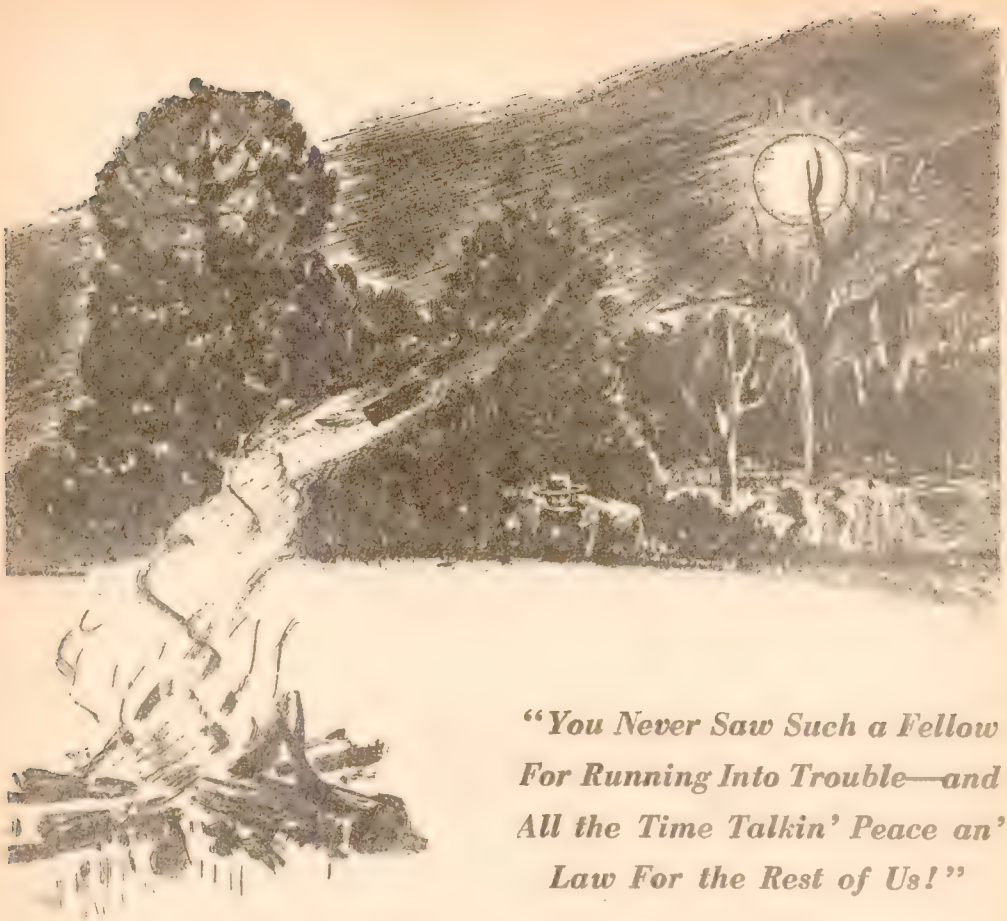
THE STORY SO FAR

LARRY HARVILLE, youngest son of proud Colonel Maxwell Harville returns to his home in Arkansas after years of schooling in England, to find his father and two half brothers, Tom and Andy, feuding with the fiery Logans, a neighboring family.

Larry, who has the gentle nature of his dead mother, is sickened by the thought of more bloodshed and a short time later saves Diane Logan from a wild boar.

This and the sudden menace of the brigand Lige Labreu and his gang draws the two families closer. Labreu and his henchmen once committed many crimes in this district until they were caught, largely through the efforts of Major Logan and Colonel Harville, and sentenced to hang. But they escape and have vowed revenge on the neighborhood.

Shortly after, Larry is nearly killed by Lige Labreu's son Craw but manages to turn the tables and captures the young guerrilla. The aroused countryside decides to organize a posse to hunt down Labreu, but withdraws from the swamp lands where the gang has hidden itself after an exchange of shots. A peace offer comes from Labreu. He



"You Never Saw Such a Fellow For Running Into Trouble—and All the Time Talkin' Peace an' Law For the Rest of Us!"

wants Craw back and a guaranty of safe passage out of the country.

No sooner is the offer turned down than the Labreus bust into the local jail, releasing Craw and killing the jailor. The Harvilles hear, meanwhile, that the brigands plan to kidnap Diane Logan. They warn the Major but instead Lige takes the wife and two children of Mack Gillis, a poor farmer and friend of the Harvilles and Logans. He holds them as assurance that Mack will faithfully perform the errand of buying up extra rifles for the gang's planned break for Texas. Another posse is organized and sets out.

Major Logan himself heads after them and pushes into the slough. In the vastness of the dark quagmire he dismounts to look for signs that the posse has passed this way.

Suddenly he is startled to hear a voice order, "Drop that gun, Major." He is in the hands of the Labreus!

CHAPTER XX

THE LABREUS ENTERTAIN A GUEST

THE slender body of Logan straightened from the crouch, the shotgun still in his hand. His finely chiseled face, cold as granite, did not betray the conviction that the dark shadow of death was hovering over him. It did not show how greatly shocked he was. The outlaw had him covered of course. He had no chance of escape. But the quick way out would be the easy one, and even after a bullet had torn through him he might have time for one shot.

A ribald laugh sounded as a man's head and heavy shoulders rose from behind a clump of young hackberry bushes. The rifle in his hands pointed directly at the major.

"He ain't drapped that gun, Pappy," the man said. "Time for me to drill him, ain't it?"

"Not yet, Brad." Lige Labreu came out slowly from his cover, ready to shoot instantly. "We ain't aimin' to hurt you any, Major—not if you're anyways reasonable. I got a proposition to make. We'll talk it over nice and friendly, after you have put down the gun."

THE impudent soft slyness of Labreu's voice did not deceive Logan. He knew that back of the shallow restless eyes was a burning hatred. But with two rifles on him he had not a dead man's chance in a fight. Before he could make a move he would be shot down. It could do no harm to play for time.

"I'll make no bargain with you, Labreu," the planter said bluntly. "You and your whole brood are murdering scoundrels false as Satan."

"He's askin' for it, Pappy," Brad said. "An' I got a score to settle with him. I ain't forgot the time he and Harville stood by and had a fellow skin my back with a hickory."

"Hold yore horses, Brad," ordered Lige. "I got a use for him alive." He turned to Logan, and his voice held a soft purring threat. "Last call, Major. Throw down that gun naow."

Logan dropped the shotgun.

"That's right sensible," Lige continued. "If you hadn't you would of been deader than a stuck shote by now. There ain't no profit in arguing with two fellows who have the drap on you. Jes' turn raound an' I'll lift that pistol you got in yore hip pocket, Major. That's fine. We-all can take it easy and talk turkey."

"You can't use me to help in any of your devilish schemes," Logan said hardily. "If that's what you are pointing for."

"Nothing like that. You got yore principles like I got mine. I don't figure to be onreasonable. Git the horses, Brad, and we'll be startin'."

"Where you taking me?" the planter asked.

"To our camp. We can talk there nice and comfortable."

Logan knew that the hour of doom was only postponed. They would not take him to their camp without first having made up their minds never to let him get away alive.

As they rode deeper into the swamp the mosquitoes swarmed in denser clouds. The yellow-green sluggish water lay on both sides of the road heavily shaded by the cypress forest. Here and there the ugly knees jutted out of the scum. Big turtles squatted on logs, immovable as the dead timber itself. Occasionally a copperhead slid from the road into the brush. Logan shuddered at the ghastly solitude of death they were penetrating. Presently they left the road and waded up a bayou, circling in and out, crossing small islands, dropping down into the water again, until Logan had lost his sense of direction.

"Every day you stay here in the swamp makes your ruin more certain, Labreu," he told his captor. "You'll never get away."

"I fotch comfort from the swamp," the outlaw differed. "The Cache is an old friend of mine. You-all never would of cotched me if you hadn't tricked me into trying to burn Harville's store."

THE camp of the bandits was on a wooded island. As the three riders sloshed up out of the water to land, Logan was aware that two men with rifles watched their approach, even though Brad Labreu had given warning while a hundred yards distance by hooting twice like an owl.

One of the men was Sim Labreu, the other was his brother Craw. Sim showed a double row of bad teeth in a grin. "I see you done cotched a big fish in yore net, Pappy," he exulted.

A gleam of cruelty danced in the cold shallow eyes of his father. "I didn't exactly cotch him. He bullheaded in, and o' course I couldn't tell him he wasn't welcome. So I let him stay."

"But I don't reckon we'll let him go," Craw jeered. "Not after his high and mighty son shot pore Fin."

Logan looked from one to another with cold contempt. "Too bad he didn't bag the pair of you," he said. "Scum of the earth."

A dull angry flush suffused the face of the youngest son. "I've a mind to fill you

ful of lead right damn now," he said, between clenched teeth.

"Don't forget that Major Logan is our guest, boys," Lige said with suave and brutal irony. "We're gonna fix up a li'l agreement, him an' we-uns."

"No," Logan dissented sharply.

A SHUTTER dropped over the eyes of Lige, a film which left them opaque and bland. "That's what you think naow, Major," he replied, his slitted mouth set in an evil grin. "But I'm a right good persuader. A heap of folks have changed their minds when I put things to them my way."

"It will save you trouble to shoot me now," Logan told him scornfully. "Why waste time?"

"Sho, Major, I don' mind taking a li'l trouble to git what I want. Let's not be in a hurry. You don't even know what it is I'm gonna ask you." Lige turned to Sim. "Did Gillis git back?"

"An hour ago. With two rifles and a carbine. Cad is holdin' him down at Pit Hollow. He keeps squawkin' about getting his wife and kids back."

"He'll git them, like I promised," Lige said. "The woman is going to tote a letter from the major to his sons."

Logan stood ramrod straight, his steady gaze fixed on Lige. No words came from his close-shut lips.

"Jes' a few lines to tell the boys he's in a tight, and for them to scrape up ten thousand dollars ransom money inside of two days. When we git this the major can ride away peart as a mule that has busted into a corn crib." The bandit's voice was bland and gentle.

Craw opened his mouth to object, but the crafty look his father slid toward him stopped the words. He knew that when Lige was soft and smooth as butter in his talk there was deviltry in the back of his mind.

"Sim, you go bring Miz Gillis and the young-uns while I fix up the letter with the major," Lige continued. "I told Mack we would look after them as if they were our own kin, and I 'low to keep my word."

From his pocket he took a cheap notebook and the stub of a pencil. These he handed to the major. With the palm of a dirty hand he rubbed his unshaven chin to facilitate thought. "Tell the boys you made a leetle mistake and got cotched by us. Say for them not to worry, 'cause you'll be safe as a nigger at church—if they turn over to me the money on time. You got that down?"

The major's pencil stopped. He waited for the rest of the message his captor was dictating,

"Ten thousand dollars. Not a nickle less."

Logan interrupted. "Do you think I keep ten thousand loose, or even in a bank?" he asked.

"They can borrow it, if they get a move on them. One of them is to come to the old Peters cabin below the ford at eleven o'clock Friday mawnin' and bring the money. He's to come alone. We-uns will be watching. If anyone is with him—or follows after him—you'll be a gone goose, Logan. Put that down plain."

The pencil in the major's fingers continued to write.

"No monkey tricks," Labreu went on. "Tell him he's not to be armed."

"And that he will be killed of course," Logan added quietly.

"No, suh," replied the outlaw, affronted. "I'm a square shooter. You both can go off scot free."

"Do you think they are plumb fools?" Logan inquired. "Or that I am?"

"You did me a heap of meanness onct, Major," the bandit reminded him. "But shucks! In this yere world a fellow cain't nurse a grudge. If yore folks play fair with me I will with them. That's a Christian spirit, hain't it? Oh, another thing to put daown on that paper. Have yore boys tell Colonel Harville to stop pesterin' me with posses. All the good it will git him is to have them shot up like yore boy was. 'Ceppen that next time they will git killed. When we had that last fracas most all we had was six-guns. Now we got new Winchesters."

"So I gather, you dirty scoundrel," retorted Logan bluntly. "You made poor Mack Gillis get them for you to save his wife and children."

"No, sir." Lige volunteered. "He hated to see you-all pick on me."

The prisoner did not believe that for a moment. He finished writing and handed the paper to the other man. Like looked at

the scrawl suspiciously. He held it closer and then farther from his eyes as if to see clearer. Logan guessed that he could not read. Without any comment Labreu passed the notebook to his son Crawford. The young man's lips moved as he began to spell out the words to himself slowly.

Sim came over the brow of a low hill, with him Mrs. Gillis and her two children. Logan understood the situation without any explanation. While Mack was getting the rifles for the bandits his family had been brought here as hostages for his good faith.

The woman stared unhappily at the major. She did not know how he had come here, but it was plain he was a prisoner.

Logan said grimly, "There's no fool like an old fool, Mrs. Gillis."

Lige took the notebook from Craw impatiently. "Miz Gillis, read to me what's wrote there."

THE woman read the message silently and her startled gaze went to the major for help. If she told Labreu what Logan had written, she was afraid his anger would destroy the planter.

"Read it, Mrs. Gillis," Logan said.

She moistened her dry lips and began.

"I'm a prisoner of that devil Lige Labreu," Fannie Gillis read aloud. "It's my own fault. If this gets to my sons I want them to know there is no use trying to save me. Any offer he makes will be a trap. Don't deal with him. I'm already as good as dead. Go ahead and wipe out the scoundrels. Good-by."

The message was signed, Perry Logan.

Labreu's lips tightened to a thin cruel line. His bleak eyes stared at the white set face of the planter, a redhot devil of rage burning in them. While his sons broke into savage curses he stood in silence trying to curb the murderous passion aflame in him. Not till his voice was under control did he speak.

"Looks like I'll have to start gobbling right soon," he said, almost in a murmur, his swarthy face turned purple.

"I told you before that there was no use wasting time," the major reminded him.

"He'll sing another tune before we-uns git through playin' with him," Brad said. "How about startin' in on Mr. Logan?"

The sly craftiness of the old guerrilla asserted itself. "No hurry, boys. We'll take fust things fust." He turned to Mrs. Gillis, a thin false smile of propitiation on his face. "You see how it is, Fannie. I'm offerin' to forget the past—all the meanness Logan and Harville did to us—but the major here acts like he is God Almighty and won't have it thataway. I'm sending you and the young uns back to Mack now. You and Mack go to Harville or to the Logan boys and tell how things are, how Logan butted in and we took him prisoner and under the circumstances we got to hold him for ransom." He explained the conditions upon which the captive would be released, repeating them so that no mistake could be made.

Fannie Gillis promised to carry the message. She added, anxiously, "I hope you-all won't do Major Logan any harm, Mr. Labreu, while we're gettin' things fixed up."

"We'll treat him nice as we did you and the children, Fannie," the outlaw promised unctuously. "Old Lige ain't half as bad as folks make out. Hit's the old story of giving a dog a bad name. The boys lost their mammy early and they got a rough bark, but underneath they are kind as kittens. Don't you worry none about the major—if his friends think enough of him to raise this money and do exactly like I told you."

Logan said, his slender figure erect and his stern eyes showing no fear, "You can tell my boys that when they hand over this money to these murderers they will be giving the signal for my death—if I am still alive."

The woman and the children were blindfolded before they were helped to the backs of the horses. The last words Mrs. Gillis heard from those remaining in camp were an urgent demand from Brad that to start with they tie up the major to a tree and wear him to a frazzle with a hickory in reprisal for the whipping that had been given Brad years before.

CHAPTER XXI

LARRY BREAKS BAD NEWS

WHILE Maxwell Harville, deputized by the sheriff, was making preparations to ride into the swamp, he was debating with himself about whom to leave in charge

of the plantation. He could see that Larry expected to be one of the posse, but he thought the boy ought to stay at home. Larry was not cut out to be a man-hunter. Still, he did not want to hurt the feelings of his son.

He tried to make a careless approach to the subject. Lige was smart as a fox, he explained, and while they were in the slough might slip out and burn the house or the gin. Since Larry was the youngest he was elected to guard the property.

Larry flushed. He guessed his father was not too well satisfied with the reports he had heard about his conduct during the previous incursion into the swamp of the Cache. Since Larry was ashamed of his own softness it was a sore point with him. He would much prefer to stay at the plantation, but that was the very reason why he could not do so. His mind would never be at ease until he had convinced himself that his timidity did not run as far as cowardice.

"I want very much to go, sir," he answered quickly. "It's . . . important to me. Burns can look after the place. And after all, sir, with that game leg you ought to stay here yourself. We all think so."

"My leg is all right," the colonel answered. "I'm going this time. That's settled." He knew from Larry's voice and manner that his protest was not perfunctory, any more than it was based on a young man's eagerness for adventure, his resentment at being debarred from a dangerous expedition. It lay deeper than that. Some hint of what was in his son's mind reached him. It might not be fair to try to shield him from peril. A man must run his own risks in life.

"All right, son," he conceded. "You have a right to go if you insist. I'll leave Burns in charge here. Jes' Tolable is holding the fort at the gin."

They were busy saddling when Abe Colton and Bud Clinton reached Rosemont. Before they left the yard Ed Travis joined them, bringing word that the youngest Logan boy was waiting at the bridge.

Harville's party rode down and joined them. There was a short discussion as to the best point of entrance into the slough. Colonel Harville favored the lower corduroy road, where Jim Smith had seen the Labreus and the Gillis family. Hal Logan said that since they had to trust to luck anyhow and probably wouldn't see any of the outlaws for several days it did not much matter which way they rode. The trail suggested by the colonel was as likely to be right as any other.

The horses, packed closely near the end of the bridge, shifted positions restlessly, due to the nervousness of a young bay stallion ridden by Travis. It danced about, went up in the air twice, then made a bolt to get out of the huddle. The animal's weight struck heavily the roan of Larry and flung him from the saddle. He went down hard, the side of his head hitting the ground.

Swiftly his brothers dismounted. Tom kept back the milling horses while Andy carried Larry out of the pack and laid him down at the foot of a gum tree. When Larry came back to consciousness his father was bending over him. The others stood around in a semi-circle.

"I . . . fell off," he murmured, and looked at the bloodstained handkerchief his father was re-folding to get a dry spot.

When he sat up his head swam dizzily. He caught at the colonel's coat sleeve.

They carried him to the house and sent for Doctor Watkins. He dressed the wound and assured the family that Larry ought to be all right in a day or two. If he stayed at home and rested on the sofa it would not be necessary for him to go to bed.

Maxwell did not like to leave him, but Larry laughed at his solicitude. "Mandy will look after me fine," he said. "She took care of me when I had chills and fever long ago."

Reluctantly the colonel set out with the posse.

For Larry the afternoon wore away very slowly. He had a headache and felt feverish. Mandy brought him a cool glass of lemonade two or three times. She bathed his hot face with cold water from the well.

He picked up the latest copy of the weekly St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, the only city paper to which his father subscribed. Browsing through it, his eyes fell on an Indian yarn a reporter had got from a pioneer Texan visiting the city. The old-timer had come from the country west of the Brazos. He had lived there when the Kiowas and Comanches were raiding the frontier settle-

ments. On one of these expeditions they had captured two young white girls. A neighbor had taken the trail after the marauders, had followed them for a week, and had at last come on their camp when the savages were less vigilant than usual on account of a great feast they had just held. He had slipped into the camp and freed the girls. For many days he had fed and cheered them, and at last had brought them safely back home.

He looked up from the paper to see that Burns was helping Mandy get the food for the posse to the porch.

In spite of the scolding of the old colored woman he went out to the porch to see the two pack mules loaded with supplies for his father's posse. Three armed men were to guard them to the rendezvous in the corn brake near the old Polk Road.

Before the party started a wagon creaked into the yard. In it were Mack Gillis and his family. The others stared at them.

"Lige turned you-all loose," Burns said.

"Yes." Mack did not want to discuss that now, though he knew he would have to tell the story later to the colonel. "I got bad news. Major Logan got cotched by the Labreus."

This was a disturbing development. Larry asked, "How do you know?"

"He sent a message by Fannie. She and the children were in his camp. He made them go and stay there. Looks like Lige aims to do turrible things to the major."

"What was the message?"

Even as Larry asked the question his heart sank. He knew what tortures the Labreus were capable of inflicting.

"He swears he'll turn the major loose if one of the Logan boys takes ten thousand dollars to the old Peters cabin below the ford at eleven o'clock Friday mawnin'. He is to go alone, or the major will be killed right then."

"Good Lawd!" one of the pack train guards groaned. "He's shore got the dead wood on the Logans."

"The Gobbler will kill off the major sure enough if he don't git the money," another said.

"He'll probably kill him whether he gets it or not," Burns was of the opinion. "Lige hates him and he won't miss a chance *like* this."

"How does Lige figure the Logans kin raise ten thousand dollars by Friday with everybody pore as church mice since the damned carpet-baggers robbed us?" a packer wanted to know.

Burns agreed that it would be very difficult. Though some of the planters had estates with good bottom land almost none of them had much ready money. Last season had been a bad cotton year with prices low, and it had taken all the plantation owners had in cash to carry their tenants through the winter and spring. Larry knew where the ransom money could be got, but he said nothing about this to the others.

Though the capture of Logan would probably cause Colonel Harville to abandon the present hunt for the outlaws, Burns and Larry decided to let the supplies go forward. Maxwell Harville would have to use his best judgment as to what he had better do. Larry thought he would return to Rosemont unless he had already contacted the Labreus.

To a stable boy Larry gave order that his horse be saddled.

Burns looked at him in surprise. "You cain't ride," he said.

"I'm going to Hillcrest," Larry told him.

"You know what the doctor said. For you to lie down and keep quiet. I'll send a boy with a note to the Logans. Dictate it, and I'll write it for you. You hadn't ought to be up at all."

"I have to go to the Logans myself," Larry insisted.

He spoke with such sharp decision that Burns gave up. All the Harvilles were bull-headed when they made up their minds.

"I can have a boy drive you in the buggy," the overseer suggested.

"No, I'll ride." Larry turned to Mrs. Gillis. "Did you see Major Logan? Or did Lige just tell you the major was his prisoner?"

"I saw him and talked with him. Lige had me read aloud a letter the major had written. I don't reckon Lige can read."

"Who was the letter to?"

"To the Logan boys. Lige told him what to write."

"I see. You have that letter now?"

"No, Lige tore hit up and stomped hit into the ground. Major Logan hadn't writ what he told him to. He said he was gonna

be killed anyhow and for them not to pay ransom. I hated to read it to Lige, but the major told me to go ahead." She explained what Labreu had wanted said and how Logan had defied him. Her voice broke a little when she added that she was feared they were going to be awful mean to the prisoner as soon as she left.

"They don't grow with more cold nerve than Major Logan has got," one of the guards said with approving admiration.

LARRY said nothing. As he rode from Rosemont he was very unhappy at the news he was carrying to the women at Hillcrest. He meant to cover up his worst fears, but no matter how he dressed up the evil tidings he knew it would be a blow to Mrs. Logan and her daughter.

The road ran through a slash of hickories to a stretch of dense underbrush pushing close to the wagon tracks. It flashed into Larry's mind that this would be a choice spot for a bushwhacker to fire from cover. His eyes swept to right and left over the bushes. The grip on the rifle lying across the saddle tightened.

There was a rustle among the vines and a man stepped from them to the road. He was carrying a muzzle-loading squirrel rifle. The man was Curt Moss. His big shapeless figure shuffled across the road. Evidently he had not heard the rider, for when he looked up there was a startled surprise on the big dish face. Larry had halted the horse and the Winchester was in both of his hands now but still resting on the saddle seat.

Moss stopped at the edge of the road, then started to pass into the brush.

"Just a moment, Mr. Moss," Larry said. "If you are taking a short cut you can travel easier where the brush isn't so thick. Better move down the road to more open country."

Larry had seen a sudden crafty gleam light up the man's face. He might be wrong, but he was afraid that as soon as Moss was in the cover of thick brush the fellow meant to shoot him out of the saddle.

Irritated at this order, Moss broke out angrily. "What's eatin' you? I ain't ever done you any harm, but if you keep on ridin' me I shorely will."

"I'm not going to hurt you," Larry said. "But just now we're not taking any chances with Lige Labreu's kin."

Moss grumbled, but did as he was told. They came to a small prairie. When they had reached center of it Larry released his prisoner.

"You'll be sorry for this," Moss threatened.

Larry did not answer. He was glad when he had dipped over the edge of the prairie into a wooded hollow beyond. The road brought him up a long slope to the private avenue leading into the Logan place.

A colored maid came to the door and invited him to come in while she called Mrs. Logan. Larry thought he had better wait on the piazza. It was Diane who presently came to the door.

She said: "Won't you come in, Mr. Harville? Mother is upstairs with Rod, but will be down in a minute."

"It is pleasant here," he answered. "Perhaps I had better not come in."

Her startled eyes were resting on the bandage round his head. "You've been hurt," she exclaimed.

"Fell off a horse," Harville explained.

A smile rippled over her face. "For a man devoted to peace you seem to get into a lot of trouble. The last time I saw you somebody had been using your face as a target for his fists. You are as bad as my brothers."

"How is Rod doing?"

"He is in a vile temper because he can't ride in the posse with father and Hal. That means he is getting better."

Larry had not answered her smile. The bad news of which he was the bearer filled his mind. He had intended to wait until her mother came to tell it, but now he blurted it out.

"Miss Logan, I've got to hurt you dreadfully. Your father has been taken prisoner by the Labreus."

The girl went white to the lips. She leaned against the door jamb to steady herself. "Is he—alive?" she asked, the last word a whisper.

"Yes. Labreu has sent a message. He wants ransom money."

Mrs. Logan came down the hanging stairway to the porch. Diane walked swiftly to her mother and put an arm around her waist. "Oh, Mother! Mr. Harville brings

terrible news. The Labreus have taken father prisoner."

Larry thought that Sallie Logan was going to faint, but she steadied herself by clutching the back of a chair. Her grip was so tight that the finger bones stood out like small white knobs.

"Will you . . . tell me about it . . . please?" she said.

He repeated the story Mrs. Gillis had brought, putting as hopeful a view on the situation as he could. There were some gaps in his version. He did not mention that Major Logan had advised against paying the ransom money as he would be killed anyhow. Since the planter was still alive there was a chance he might be saved, though Larry could not see how, and he felt it would be better for Diane and her mother to hope as long as it was possible.

"When we give them ten thousand dollars they will free my husband?" Mrs. Logan asked.

"That's what Labreu says." Larry added that he had kept his word about letting Mrs. Gillis and the children go after Mack had finished his errand for them.

"You know about that then," Sallie Logon said. "Lige held Mack's family prisoner until he returned from Oldport with some rifles and ammunition. My husband saw Mack buy the guns. He thought Mack was buying them for your father until he learned about Fannie Gillis being a prisoner."

"That explains a lot we did not understand," Larry said. "On the whole it is encouraging. He knew Mack was one of the posse fighting againt him but let him go."

"Yet," Mrs. Logan agreed. But all three of them knew that Mack and Major Logan had different values in this equation. One was a small factor, the other important. Ever since Lige Labreu had been driven out he had carried a fierce hatred against Perry Logan.

Diane turned to her mother, worry in her face. "How can we get the money? Father hasn't that much in the bank, has he?"

"He hasn't five hundred dollars," Sallie answered. "We'll have to borrow from friends—if any of them have it."

That was the rub. None of the neighboring planters would have it. She would have to go to Brandon and see what she could do there—and there was such a little time.

LARRY told them hesitantly what was in his mind. He begged them not to reject it without consideration. A bachelor uncle of his in England had died recently and left him a part of his estate. Just now he had twenty thousand dollars lying idle in a Little Rock bank. "We all have to work together against these scoundrels," he added quickly. "They are our common enemies. This will be my contribution to the cause."

Sallie Logan thought this very generous of the son of their enemy, but she was loath to accept the offer. She knew her husband would not like to be ransomed with Harville money. That she was grateful she made clear, but if there was any other way of getting the money she would prefer to take it.

Larry flung into words impulsively the feeling that had been so much in his mind since coming home. He spoke to the mother, but the appeal was directed even more to Diane. This family feud was all wrong. Of course he had been away and not mixed up in it, but for that reason he could see more clearly the folly of it. In the early days, long before the war, their families had been friends. If they would all throw away their stiffnecked pride they might still be.

"Does Colonel Harville feel that way?" asked Mrs. Logan, a touch of irony in her gentle voice. She felt very much as Larry did, but loyalty to her husband kept her from saying so.

"I think he does, but his pride won't let him say so," Larry answered. "This trouble with the Labreus is driving us together. Your son is riding beside my brothers at this moment, going into danger to stamp out a nest of murderers. I'm sure you don't like this Logan-Harville feud and will try to stop it."

She agreed, but added a proviso. "I stand with Major Logan in whatever he thinks best."

"He must know the feud is dead," Larry insisted. "Hal saved my life. None of us would hurt him or any of his family. Why can't we all be reasonable and drop a silly quarrel that has no right to exist?"

"I can," Diane broke out unexpectedly.

"I hate the feud. It is wrong. Unless we are all insane we'll drop it. Let's take Mr. Harville's offer of the money. It's the only way we can raise it in time. What father would think does not matter. We have to save his life."

The mother looked at the flushed and eager girl. "You are quite right, Diane. I am going to accept this generous offer, Mr. Harville."

"If you can lend me one of your boys to carry a telegram to Big Hollow I'll get in touch with my lawyer at once," Larry said.

The shining eyes of Diane told him how pleased she was. No doubt the Capulet-Montague feud at Verona several hundred years ago had seemed to her very romantic, but brought down to date with her own family involved it was a nuisance and an ever-present threat. So much Larry guessed. But he did not know how much more intolerable the quarrel had become to her since his return from England.

Nor did he know how deeply Sallie Logan shared his hope for a termination of the feud. Many an hour she had worried for fear her husband or one of her boys would be killed by the Harvilles. That would never occur now, she felt sure. Perhaps the coming of this boy was a sign sent in answer to prayer, a promise that all the clouds in her troubled sky would be swept away and give place to sunshine.

CHAPTER XXII

CURT MOSS LAYS A TRAP

AS LARRY turned the head of his horse toward Rosemont he felt a little weak physically, but his spirit was buoyed up by a renewal of hope. The Logan-Harville feud was dead. There might never be any real friendship between the families, but there would be no more warfare. There must be some way of getting the major back alive. The story he had read in the *Globe-Democrat* kept running through his mind. But the rescuer there had been a frontier scout skilled in that type of sleuthing. If he were here now, or someone like him—

It was at that moment Larry had his crazy idea. But he had no time then to develop it. A rifle cracked. His horse staggered. Its front knees buckled. Larry felt himself flying from the saddle. He landed in a huddle, the Winchester four feet in front of him. His mind worked in swift flashes.

The falling darkness had saved him so far. He must find cover in the brush. But on which side of the road? He did not know, for on one side of it his ambusher lay crouched.

He reclaimed the rifle and plunged into the bushes. A bullet whipped past his shoulder as he stumbled into a hollow left by the roots of a down tree. His body landed on a squirming mass of flesh. Flying arms and legs struck out at him. The rush to escape had plumped him into the pit where the bushwhacker had stationed himself.

Larry and his opponent were at too close quarters to use their rifles. Each dropped his weapon, realizing that this was a two-handed rough and tumble with his life at stake. They clung to each other desperately, rolling over and over. By the fading light Larry recognized his opponent—Curt Moss. Of the two Moss was the heavier and the stronger, Larry the more lithe and active.

By sheer power Moss swung on top, but before he could spread his legs and get set the younger man had tilted him over. They were both breathing hard, but Moss was getting the air into his lungs by gasping gulps. He had let himself take on too much blubber for violent exercise. His thumbs felt for Larry's eyes and jabbed into them. To protect himself Larry buried his face in the man's chest and got a finger grip on the fat throat.

Moss heaved himself free, and both scrambled to their feet. Into his enemy's belly Larry sent a hard short arm jolt that made Moss grunt. Another crashed to the chin. The big man knew he could not stand off and trade blows. He tried to close, and a second right to the vulnerable belly drove him back.

He had taken enough, and in his mind was a growing fear of the end. Bolting from the hole, Moss tore through the brush and dropped into another depression thirty yards away. He stopped only because the sound of a rifle warned him that in the open stretch just ahead he would make too good a mark.

The man had left his rifle in the windfall hole, but Larry had caught a glimpse of the

revolver at his hip. It would be dangerous to follow him. If one approached the hollow where he had found refuge he could shoot from cover.

There was nothing to do but wait. Neither man could leave his shelter without being seen. Larry did not know enough about a .45 to be sure whether it would carry with accuracy the distance between them. It was better to stick to his protection until he had a chance to slip away.

As the minutes dragged away Larry's nerves were taut as fiddle strings. He could not be quite sure that his enemy had not crept out of his hole and was making a circle to get at him from the rear. More than once he half decided to make a run for it, but he fought the urge down. He must stick it out and not break under the strain. His stomach tightened and screwed into a hard knot.

The moon came up and lit the scene with a silvery glow. Larry raised his head cautiously and a bullet whipped past him. It scattered dirt from the upended root behind him. He ducked, not answering the shot. But presently it occured to him that it might be well to let Moss know he was on the lookout. He fired into the air.

It was three or four minutes later that the silence was shattered by a shout of fear.

"Goddlemighty, who's there?" a voice screamed.

Larry rose to his knees. He had to find out what was occurring.

Moss had leaped from cover. He stood for an instant, uncertain which way to run. At sight of Larry his revolver flamed twice. Larry fired. The man stood in the moonlight, his big body swaying a little, then pitched heavily to the ground.

A voice from the brush called, "You are right, Mr. Larry?"

Harville called back, "Yes. That you, Jes' Tolable?"

"Shore is." Tolt stepped into the open and looked down at the prone figure. "Dead as a stuck shote," he said.

"I had to do it," Larry said, his body shaking from a nervous reaction. "He shot at me from ambush. Missed me and killed my hore."

"No regrets about him," Tolt said coolly. "He was a triflin', no-account scoundrel. You sure plugged him good."

"He was firing at me when I hit him," Larry explained.

"So I noticed." Tolt laughed. "I let him hear me coming a-purpose. He got goosey and started to light out. I reckon he figured you was barrin' the way. You'd ought to be right glad you got him, Mr. Larry. Evah since you whopped him he's been ready to waylay you."

Though Larry knew that was true, he was unhappy at what he had done. He did not see how he could have helped killing Moss, after humiliating him at the time of the fight. But death is so final. He was shocked at this tragic result.

Tolt realized how unstrung the young man was and refrained from looking at him. He busied himself gathering the weapons of the bushwhacker and helping Larry strip the saddle from the dead horse. Bridle and saddle they hid in the brush, to be collected later. All the time he kept up a line of cheerful chatter. Moss had been at the gin during the afternoon and had made some inquiries of a Negro boy as to Larry's movements. He had given the boy a dime, a highly suspicious donation, since Curt Moss was notoriously stingy. Tolt had it in his mind to warn Larry, and when later in the day he heard that young Harville had been seen riding down the road alone it worried him. The chances were ten to one the two men would not meet, or if they did it would probably be under circumstances which would make trouble unlikely. But he could not get the fear out of his mind and after supper had forked his mule to go meet the boy.

As he jogged down the road there came to Tolt the sound of a distant rifle shot. This made him uneasy, since it was getting too dark for a hunter to see squirrels or turkeys. A few minutes later he caught sight of Larry's dead horse lying in the dusty road. He pulled up and dismounted, then soft-footed forward. His sharp ears caught a faint stir in the bushes, and he had crept toward the sound. The rest Larry knew.

THERE was comfort in the man's lazy nasal drawl. Back of the words was the implication that a villain who had tried to murder and had fallen victim to his own plot was responsible for his own death. By

the time they reached the first Rosemont fence Larry's thoughts were back again on the wild idea he had conceived for rescuing Major Logan. His partner in the enterprise was to be Shep Tolt.

He drew up at the fence and interrupted Shep's monologue. In a few sentences he outlined what he had in mind.

Shep shook his head. "You're plumb crazy," he said. "Cain't be done."

Larry went into more detail. The outlaw camp must be within reasonable distance of the old Peters cabin below the ford, since that was the place appointed for the payment of the ransom money. A Negro had seen Mose Dull crossing the ford on horseback late at night. Prodded by Colonel Harville, the sheriff had gone to the old Peters clearing and found evidence that men had been there not only once but two or three times very recently. Evidently it was a contact point between the outlaws and their spy.

Shep agreed that Larry's deduction was probably correct.

"How many places are there in the slough, close to the cabin, that are suitable for a camp?" Larry asked.

That would depend on how near, Shep replied. It was right boggy down at that end of the swamp. The best spot would be Spook Point. On the little island there was a spring and grass for the horses, and it was so well concealed that nobody knew how to reach it.

"Then we can depend on it," Larry said. "That's where they are. When you say nobody knows you don't include Jes' Tolable."

Shep looked at his companion with curious appraising eyes. This nice-looking boy, who had gone shuddery because he had rubbed out a scalawag trying to murder him, was asking Shep to take the damnedest crazy risk with him. It didn't make good sense.

"Say I mebbe could git you to their camp," he demurred. "Dad burn it, we wouldn't last no longer than a snowball in hell. Hit might be all right if I could take a mess of gunmen there, exceptin' that they would shore hear us coming when we splashed through the water."

"And that they would kill Major Logan before we got there." Larry shook his head. "Two of us could get there without being heard. A lot of corn whiskey is going to their camp. They will sleep soundly at night. You can stay back with the horses while I slip over to the island and release Major Logan. I don't say it can be done, but I'm going to try. The ransom offer doesn't mean safety for him. He'll be killed soon as they get the money."

Tolt rumpled his hair, a puzzled frown on his homely face. "You're the doggondest fellow ever I seed. Yore pappy was shootin' up the major the other day. Now you're 'lowing to bust into the gates of hell and come out a-draggin' the old boy with you."

"With your help," Larry added.

"Dad gum it, I reckon I'll go," Tolt complained ruefully. "I'm always gettin' drug into some crazy thing or other. You'd think at my age I would of learned some sense." He stopped, struck by another thought. "What's yore pappy going to say about this?"

"He isn't going to know anything about it until we've brought back the major," Larry told him.

"Yeah, an' if you git killed off I got to come back and git skinned alive when I tell him."

"I don't expect to get killed."

Larry told him the story of the Texas young fellow who had followed the raiding Comanches for weeks, stolen into their camp, and rescued the two young girls who were prisoners. "They claim you can cut a trail like an Indian and crawl through brush without making a sound," young Harville concluded. "I'm going to find out whether you can live up to your reputation."

They reached Rosemont just as Colonel Harville's posse was getting back.

CHAPTER XXIII

A PARTNERSHIP OF THREE

COLONEL HARVILLE had a much less exciting story to tell than Larry. His posse had plowed through swamps and made no contact with the outlaws. It had come home as soon as the news of Perry Logan's capture had reached the men at the rendezvous. The tale told by Jes' Tolable and Larry shocked the planter, though he was deeply grateful for the escape of his son. He wasted no pity on the fate of Curt Moss.

The fellow had set a cowardly trap and himself become the victim of it. That was according to Scriptural prophecy. But it was an appalling thought that except for the semi-darkness the ambusher's first shot would probably have been fatal.

Maxwell Harville relieved his disturbed mind by scolding Larry. "The doctor said for you to stay home. You could have sent a boy with a note to Mrs. Logan, but you have to go traipsing off yourself. Even so, if you were so hell bent on going, you might have stopped at the gin and Jes' Tolable would have ridden with you. It was God's mercy you weren't killed. I never saw such a boy for runnin' into trouble, and all the time you're talkin' about peace and law for the rest of us."

His son explained that he had wanted to persuade Mrs. Logan to accept the loan of the ransom money. He admitted he had been careless in going alone. Larry was very tired, and it was with a white-faced smile he promised that next time he went to the Logans he would take Jes' Tolable as a guard.

By this time the colonel's exasperation had blown away. He said, gently, "Son, you better go right to bed. You look limp as a dishrag."

To his own surprise Larry slept soundly all night. When he awoke in the middle of the forenoon he felt quite well. Mandy had a hot breakfast waiting for him. He ate heartily, rather astonished at his swift recovery. His father hung around him, amusingly like a hen clucking over its chicks just saved from a hawk, Larry thought.

After consideration Larry had made a change in his plan for the rescue of Major Logan. He talked it over with Shep Tolt who agreed with him that they ought to include Hal Logan in the adventure. He had a right to share in it, and Larry knew that if they left him out he would be furious later.

As soon as dinner was over, Larry joined Shep at the gin and the two rode to Hillcrest.

"I promised father I would take you with me next time I called on the Logans, but I don't think he'll feel you are a safe guard when he hears of our little expedition tonight," Larry said with a chuckle.

Hal was at the stable saddling a horse as they rode up the avenue. He turned the animal over to a stable boy and joined them. Young Logan had heard the story of the shooting of Curt Moss and they talked of it for a minute or two. He wanted to tell Harville he was grateful for his offer of the ransom money, but he found it difficult to begin. When he blurted out his thanks, Larry waved them aside.

The money was not doing him any good in the bank, he said. He was glad to let them have it. But he and Jes' Tolable had another plan they wanted to talk over with Hal. It might not succeed, but he thought it would be worth trying. In a few sentences he sketched his idea.

Hal jumped at it, as a hungry trout does at bait. His reckless and impatient nature rebelled at doing nothing active while his father was in danger. Even if they failed it would be better to try.

Shep made it clear that he could not promise to find the camp of the outlaws. But taking the evidence they had, the logical place for it was an island an old hermit had once named Spook Point. He gave his reasons. Outside of the outlaws, he was probably the only man in the district who had ever been there. On it the fugitives could find fresh water and feed for their

horses. The distance from it to the Peters cabin was not more than a couple of miles.

Hal felt sure Shep was right. "When do we start?" he asked.

Not till long after dark, Shep told him. He impressed on young Logan the need of caution. "This is Injun stuff, Mr. Hal," he said. "We cain't ram-stam in an' bull this through. If you got any such notion I'm not doing business with you. We have to slip up to the camp mighty careful. Mebbe we'll have to lie in the brush for hours. Both of you boys will have to take orders from me because you all got no experience in this yere kind of work and I have."

"That's all right with me," Hal promised.

"So you think now," Shep answered dryly. "But when you git kinda excited about being near yore pappy, how do I know you won't git crazy?"

"It wouldn't make sense for me to start a fight, Jes' Tolable," Hal said. "They would shoot father right off."

"What they would do exactly. You remember that when you air a-lying in the brush close to the camp."

Hal was in a mood to promise anything. He realized that without Tolt they could do nothing. The man was risking his life to help save the major. Moreover, he was a first-class woodsman and hunter, having done little else but fish and hunt for the most part of his life.

Larry added his pledge to do as he was told. If they were to do anything rash they might spoil their chance of rescuing the prisoner, he admitted.

They made their arrangements to meet at Big Hollow about eleven o'clock that night. That they were going on rather a forlorn hope all of them knew. But it seemed about the only chance to save Major Logan. Not one of them believed that after he had been paid the ransom money Lige Labreu would return the planter to them alive.

CHAPTER XXIV

LIGE PAMPERS HIS ENEMY

MOSE DULL advanced through the deadening at the Peters cabin with two rifles trained on him.

He protested irritably. "I done told you who I was, Lige. "What's the sense in keeping them guns p'inted at me? One of them might go off."

"So it might," the Gobbler agreed. "Jest a military precaution, Mose. Some ornery cuss might be followin' you."

"Don't you think I've got plain horse sense? Nobody could follow me without my knowing it."

"Tha's right. *Without you knowin' it.* And if you knew it o' course you wouldn't come." Lige showed his teeth in a sarcastic grin. "Mose wouldn't throw daown his kinfolks, even if he was offered a heap of money. Not good old Mose."

Brad added a word. "He wouldn't if he is allowin' to live long."

Dull threw out his hands in a hopeless gesture. "I'll be doggoned if hit ain't plumb discouraging. A man does everything in the world for you when you-all air in a tight spot, and all he gits for it is mistrust."

"You got five hundred dollars of old Flynn's buried money," Lige reminded him. "Don't forget that. Well, what's new?"

"Newest thing is that Larry Harville killed Curt Moss last night. Curt laid for him in the bushes. It was kinda dark, and he missed his shot. Young Harville went after him and got him."

Lige said, "I'll be durned," and tacked on as a rider that Curt always had been a bungler.

Dull told him of the visit to him earlier in the day of Larry and his brother Andy. They had been concerned for the safety of the Gillis family and had wanted him to negotiate with the Labreus. But since then of course Mrs. Gillis and the children had come home and reported Major Logan's capture.

"Have you heard tell what they aim to do about that?" Lige asked.

"I haven't seen ary one of them since. Colonel Harville was in the slough with a posse lookin' for you-all, but soon as he got word about Logan he turned back and come home. Daown at the store there was talk that Larry Harville was left a fortune by an English uncle an' that he has done sent to Little Rock for enough to ransom Logan. They say the Logan family air mighty anxious about the old man."

Again the face of Lige was lit by an ugly

sinister grin. "You kin report to them that the major is doing as well as kin be expected under the circumstances. He ain't what you could call right comfortable, seeing that his back was skinned good yesterday with a hickory. Brad laid the bud on. Logan and Harville gave him a whoppin' onct, so Brad figured turn about was fair play. Any time Harville wants to come an' git his it will be all right with Brad."

"If they come through with this ransom money do you aim to turn Logan loose?" Mose asked.

"Don't you reckon we had better cross that bridge when we come to it, Mose?" his cousin drawled.

"Logan ain't expecting to see his dear family again," Brad mentioned. "He shore is a game old coot—cusses us out plenty when he takes the trouble to talk with us. I 'low to break him daown yet. I got another hickory limb ready for him tomorrow."

"Have you heard anything abaout how the roads south are guarded?" Lige asked. "Or whether any U. S. deputies are expected to join in the hunt for us?"

"They claim all the roads are watched, but I reckon you could bust through at night, onless you-all had bad luck. There is some talk of gov'ment men coming yere, but I dunno how true it is."

The Labreus rode back to their camp, carrying with them another gallon of the corn whiskey with which Dull supplied them. The outlaw gang emptied the jug in the course of the evening, after which they followed Brad's suggestion that they go devil their prisoner. Major Logan was bound hand and foot. A rawhide rope fastened him to a small hickory tree.

The drunken men gathered around the prostrate planter.

"How is yore good health this evenin', Major?" Brad asked mockingly.

Logan looked up at him in contemptuous silence. Brad kicked him twice in the ribs.

"When I ask you a question you talk nice," he snarled.

One of the gang, a man they called Cad Miller, suggested that Brad's cat had stolen the major's tongue. He liked his pun so well that he repeated the key word, to make sure the others got it. "Cat. See the p'int, boys. The cat with nine tails, only this yere one of Brad's didn't have but one tail."

"Mebbe I'd better give him another dose right now and learn him to be more polite," Brad said, and again kicked the victim in the side. "Bet yore boots I could make him holler quit this time."

Lige interfered. "That'll be enough, Brad. You leave the major alone with his happy dreams. Tomorrow we might let him taste the bud again. I'll see about that."

Logan was in his late fifties and Lige did not know how much he could stand. When the ransom money was brought he wanted to be able to show the major alive if his son demanded to see him before giving up the money. It might be better to have him well enough to walk on his own feet. You never could tell what break of circumstances might arise. It was a pleasure to him to watch his enemy suffer, but a fellow ought not to indulge himself at the expense of profitable business. No use in stopping Logan's clock as long as holding him gave them the whip hand.

"You air too softhearted, Pappy," Brad complained. "You pamper yore enemies too much when you git them in a cleft stick. Old Maledon* wasn't fixin' for to hang you nice and gentle last Friday. I say, tit for tat. Logan an' his friends were 'lowin' to kill us off."

"Leave it to old Lige," his father said. "I'll tell you-all when to start workin' on Logan. I don't reckon he'll write home about what a nice time he's having."

They made sure the knots were tight before leaving the prisoner. Cad Miller was detailed to guard him, though there was not the least chance of his being able to free himself. The outlaw brought him a small pail of water from the spring and held it to his mouth while he drank. At the request of the bound man Miller flung what was left of the water over his fevered face. The guard was not by nature cruel, and he had an unvoiced admiration for the stoicism with which the planter had taken his punishment. He arranged a bit of mosquito netting over the major's hat to protect him from the buzzing pests that swarmed around them.

Logan lay on his side to avoid the pres-

* Maledon was the official executioner of Judge Parker's Fort Smith court.

sure of the ground on his torn and blood-stained back. He did not sleep. Though the pain from the flogging was not so acute as it had been, every move he made was a torment. He did not know whether the kicks from Brad Labreu's heavy boots had broken his ribs. It did not matter much. There was no hope for him. Lige wanted him alive for a time. As a prisoner he could be used profitably for trading purposes. But the Gobbler would never let him get out of his hands while he was still living.

Miller leaned against a tree trunk, the hat pulled down over his eyes. That Lige expected him to stay awake he knew. But Cad thought there was no sense in this. Gradually his body slumped lower. His eyes drooped shut, opened again, and closed. Several times he shook himself awake from a light doze, but always his head fell forward and his lids shuttered. Like the others, he had been drinking heavily. He snuggled down, gave up resistance, and presently began to snore.

CHAPTER XXV

SHEP TOLT SPEAKS HIS PIECE

BEFORE ten o'clock the lights were all out at Rosemont. Larry lay on the bed in his room, waiting until he felt reasonably sure that the others were asleep. He had changed to his working clothes. Earlier in the evening he had borrowed from his brother Tom, without asking permission, the revolver he kept in a drawer of his bureau. Tom would not be likely to miss it, and if there should be a fight in the swamp it might come in handy.

At ten-twenty Larry rose and tiptoed out to the gallery, carrying his riding boots in one hand and the Winchester in the other. On the porch steps he sat down and pulled on his boots. Ten minutes later he had saddled a small wiry bay horse and was on the Big Hollow Road.

In the daytime it had seemed a feasible adventure to ride through the swamp at night and catch the outlaws napping, but the outlook appeared very different now. A field of girdled trees bordered the road beyond the Gillis place, and in the moonlight the deadening looked like some graveyard of the Titans, an eerie spot uncanny when one's imagination was active. Larry felt the scampering of tiny cold feet up and down his back. It was madness to think that they could invade the camp of these murderous devils and come back alive. He wanted to pull up, to turn around and go back home. But he had gone too far to desert. The knowledge that two men were awaiting him at Big Hollow held him to his purpose.

Shep Tolt and Hal Logan were waiting for him back of Holcomb's store. Answering his greeting, Shep mentioned that he was jes' tolable. They took the ferry, to cut off several miles of travel. Cully Sanderson, the ferryman, was a friend of Tolt. He could be depended upon to keep his mouth shut.

Sanderson was inclined to grumble at being aroused from sleep in the middle of the night, but his resentment died away after a whispered talk with Tolt. He had not known how important this night ride was. He still was puzzled at its object, nor could he guess who was expected to fill the saddle of the riderless horse Hal Logan was leading. But Tolt impressed on him that they might be coming back in a great hurry to get across the bayou. The ferryman promised to be waiting for them on the near side when they arrived. If this was a raiding expedition to pick off a Labreu or two while the outlaws were asleep, it met with the approval of Cully Sanderson.

They passed through an oak lead to the lower ground where scattered sassafras and willow trees grew on knolls rising above the more spongy marsh. Occasionally there were buckeyes and sycamores. By this time they were on the old rotten corduroy road and Tolt was watching for the three persimmon trees that marked the point of departure from it.

The croaking frogs filled the night. As they advanced deeper into the swamp the surroundings grew more dismal. Mosquitoes buzzed about their heads incessantly. They splashed through the yellow-green water of slimy pools or through ooze into which the horses' hoofs sank to the fetlocks.

Tolt stopped several times to orient himself. They had left the three persimmon trees behind them and were following no trail. But their guide was a natural-born

woodsman. He had been once to Spook Point and had instinctively memorized a dozen landmarks on the way. A scaly-bark hickory tree. A twisted gum that had been struck by lightning. Four cypress knees in a row. Before he reached these guide posts he told his companions what to look for, and though he twice went wrong and had to turn back, he always found at last the beacons that stood out in his mental map.

Larry did not see how he could find his way in this morass which looked to him all alike. He marveled at Tolt's ability to hold a course in such a jungle.

"You're a wonder, Jes' Tolable," he applauded.

Tolt grinned. "What I thought abaout you the other day, Mr. Larry, when the colonel showed me one of yore school books. It was a furrin' book, with hen tracks for letters. Seems some fellow was a-beggin' pardon in the book for something or other. Yore pappy said it was Greek an' you could read it."

Larry was puzzled. Somebody begging pardon. Then it jumped to his mind—Plato's Apology. "He wasn't exactly begging pardon. But I get your point. You read this swamp as I do a page of the Apology, except that you do it far better, since I can just stumble through by using a dictionary. But both of us had to train ourselves to the particular kind of reading before us."

Again Tolt had stopped. He scratched his head, grinning ruefully. "I got to spell this yere bit of readin' out, looks like," he said. "An' I hain't got no dictionary neither."

"Jes' Tolable will work it out," Hal told Larry.

Their guide told them to stay where they were while he did some exploring. He had to find a cypress tree on which he had slashed a blaze, he said. It had to be near this spot, but he was not sure in what direction.

He disappeared in a thicket of trumpet vines. They could hear the sound of his horse moving in the brush, after which there was silence except for the humming of the mosquito swarms. Presently a distant blood-chilling scream lifted into the air. Larry turned, white-faced, to his companion.

Hal laughed. "Only a painter."

"It sounded like a woman."

Young Logan nodded. "Nothing sounds more fearsome than a painter's cry," he admitted.

Tolt returned from a different direction than the one in which he had started. "I done found my tree," he said proudly.

AS THEY drew nearer to the camp Tolt enjoined silence. He was careful to avoid brush as much as possible, so that the rustling of bushes might not be heard. It was possible, though not likely, that some one of the outlaws might be returning from Big Hollow even this late at night. The only chance of rescuing Major Logan was by remaining undiscovered.

"All right, Jes' Tolable," Hal said impatiently. "Let's get going."

Shep Tolt rubbed his bristly chin and looked at Logan dubiously. "I got to talk straight to you, Mr. Hal," he said. "We ain't a-going to make it if you git fussed an' in a hurry. All of us are puttin' our lives in the pot, as the old sayin' is, to holp save the major. We have to cotch these fellows asleep. No matter how long we have to wait. Like I said before, we can't bust in an' take yore pappy from this yere gang."

"You don't need to keep saying that," Hal cut back sharply. "I know it."

Tolt was an easy-going soul. He did not like to ruffle this young fire-eater. But he did not want his eagerness to destroy them all. "You got to act it well as know it. Mebbe we made a mistake in askin' you to join us."

Hal flared up. "Cut out the talk," he said curtly. "I told you I'd let you handle this. Which way do we go?"

The rather slack jaw of their guide tightened. "I hain't sure but what I'm a-goin' home right naow. I'd go a consid'rable way to git yore father outa the hands of these devils, but I don't aim to invite them to kill me off."

"Losing yore nerve, Jes' Tolable?" Hal asked acidly.

"Might be thataway," Tolt replied quietly. "What sticks out like a nigger's sore thumb is that you'n me cain't work together."

"Then show me the camp and let me handle it," young Logan said huffily.

Larry tried to pour oil on the ruffled waters. He said, gently, "Don't you think, Hal, that we have to do this under Shep's direction?"

"I've kept telling him he was running it," Hal snapped. "What more does he want?"

"I want this to go off smooth and slick," Tolt answered amiably. "If we're gonna fuss about it, we better go home an' quit."

Hal shut his mouth to keep back a sharp response. He did not speak until he had fought down his temper. That Tolt was right he realized. "I was wrong," he said. "I'll take any orders you give, Jes' Tolable."

"Tha's the way to talk, Mr. Hal," the older man said. "I ain't jes' being bossy. But you might say it's neck meat or nothing with us. Here's my idea of this. We'll tie up the horses back quite a way from the camp and wade up to the island afoot. I'll leave you boys in the brush and look things over. Mebbe I'll be away quite a spell if any of the cusses are a-stirrin'. Then we'll move up closter. Mr. Larry will creep up an' cut loose the major whilst we'uns cover him in case he is seen."

"Why Larry?" objected Hal. "He's my father."

Tolt did not give his real reason, which was that Larry would not try to hurry the job, that he was more patient and dependable, had none of the explosive daring that might lead him to underestimate danger. Moreover, the guide wanted Hal with him, to watch over and restrain him if necessary.

"We want experienced men to protect yore father and the fellow who is freeing him." Tolt smiled apologetically at Harville. "Mr. Larry is a leetle new to trouble, so I 'lowed to give him a job where he won't need a gun—if any of us do."

"That's fine," Larry said his throat tightening a bit. This was specious reasoning Tolt had given. The post of danger was in the heart of the camp, a few feet from the sleeping outlaws. He knew he had been chosen because the older man had been afraid to leave Hal alone. He felt shaky. If seen, he would go out in a blast of guns.

Hal gave way, rather resentfully. He felt that it was his own fault he was being held in the background.

They sloshed through more water and tied their mounts on a small wooded knoll to some saplings. Dimly they could make out a shadowy shore beyond them. This was Spook Point, Tolt assured them. He added that he hoped the camp was there and that the outlaws were so doggoned sound asleep that nothing would waken them.

They waded toward the island, Tolt leading the way. Their weapons they held above their heads. Each step had to be taken with the greatest care, since the bottom was slippery and full of holes. If one of them floundered and splashed it might ruin everything. At the deepest point the water reached to their hips.

Tolt stepped out of the stagnant pool, taking care not to make the least sound. The others followed. A fringe of pawpaws and muscadine vines bordered the bank. They stopped to listen. Only the frog chorus and the perpetual hum of mosquitoes broke the silence. Shep Tolt made signs that he

was going to creep forward and investigate.

He left his rifle in the bushes. Larry noticed how cautiously the man moved. Wherever possible, he went through breaks in the screen of bushes, avoiding interlacing branches so that there would be no snapping or crackling. If he had to push aside a limb it was done so gently that there was no rumor of a sound.

Though he could not have been away many minutes, it seemed to his companions that hours had passed before he rejoined them.

"The camp is just over the rise," he reported. "They're lying around a campfire. A wet log is smoking, I reckon to drive

away the skeeters. On the yon side of the fire, fifteen-twenty steps back, there was two fellows alone. I couldn't tell who they was, but I reckon it was the major and some fellow guarding him. They was both lying daown near the foot of a tree." He turned to Hal. "Likely yore pappy is tied up an' either chained or roped to that there tree. If he's chained there ain't a thing we can do, but if hit's a rope a fellow could cut it."

"Too bad the major is on the other side of the campfire," Larry whispered. "I'll have to go right past the camp."

"No," Tolt said. "We'll take to the water agin and move along the shore till we've passed it. You want to be awful careful how you move, boys. Some of them was right restless, 'count of the skeeters. If they cotched us in the water, it would be like shootin' ducks on a pond for them."

THEY stepped back into the scum-covered water and moved in single file close to the bank. Once Tolt stopped for five minutes that threatened to last forever. He had heard the sound of voices around the campfire scarcely forty feet from them. The murmur of them died away, but Shep stayed motionlessly in his tracks so long that Larry wanted to scream. At last he softfooted forward once more.

From a small backwater inlet they crept ashore and drew up behind a clump of blackberry bushes. The moonlit camp could be seen quite clearly. There was no stir or sound from it. Two of the men lay about a dozen yards from the others, not more than forty paces from the watchers. One of these must be the major.

Tolt murmured in Harville's ear. "Keep off to the left and move mighty careful. Their guns will be right beside them. If one of 'em wakes jes' lie still. We'll have him covered." He took from Larry the Winchester he carried and handed him his sharp hunting knife. "You don't have to say a word to Major Logan. If he ain't ironed, cut him loose and come back still as a fox. Course if he's chained you come back alone."

Larry nodded. His throat was tight and his nerves tense. His body was so frozen that he did not think he could start on the short perilous journey. But to his surprise the moment he inched forward the strain relaxed. His mind sloughed the fear and concentrated on the task.

He crept out from the protection of the blackberry bushes on all fours, carrying the knife between his teeth. There was an urge in him to hurry, to get it over with as soon as possible. But he knew that might be fatal. Any small stir might wake up a restless sleeper. He wanted desperately to rescue the prisoner unnoticed. Otherwise there would be a battle in which very likely several would be killed.

As Tolt had advised, he bore to the left, creeping up a hump in the ground toward the hickory trees where the captive and his guard lay. One of the outlaws grunted and turned over, so that he faced the major. Larry lay almost breathless, his body pressed close to the soil. If the fellow opened his eyes he could not miss seeing him. Presently the man's respiration became regular again.

The guard was lying with arms stretched out, his chest rising and falling stertorously. A gun was attached to a belt fastened around his waist. Larry would have liked to slip it from the holster but did not dare.

Perry Logan woke out of a troubled doze and looked at the white face moving closer to him in the moonlight. Larry put a finger to his lips in warning. The major stared, unbelieving.

What Logan saw was incredible. He had counted himself already a dead man, and unless his eyes were playing tricks a friendly enemy had come to this hell hole to help him. If miracles still occurred this must be one.

Already Larry was sawing at the rope which bound the feet of the prisoner. After this had been severed he cut the one tying the wrists. It took him a little longer to work through the rawhide thong fastening Logan to the hickory.

The major was too stiff to rise. Larry helped him to his feet. He stood there clinging to Harville, with no power of motion in the rigid legs. Larry bent down and massaged the calves and thighs, working the circulation back into them, while the major rested a hand on his back for support.

There was no use trying to creep back to the blackberry bushes. The released man had to regain the use of his legs or he would be helpless. Presently they took a step for-

ward, Larry's arm around the waist of the planter. Logan winced at the pressure on his lacerated back, but set his teeth to stand the pain. He tottered uncertainly, helpless as a child learning to walk.

As they took that slow jerky walk Larry was too busy helping the older man keep on his feet to look over his shoulder, but the fear was in him that a bullet might at any moment crash into his back.

Logan became with each step more master of his legs. They would have reached the bushes safely if his weight had not come on a small smooth branch that turned under his foot. He went down heavily, the stick cracking sharply.

Hal leaped out of the bushes. He and Larry dragged the major into cover. But the mischief was done. One of the outlaws had jumped to his feet, rifle in hand. He fired toward the shaking blackberry clump into which the figures were vanishing.

Tolt's muzzle-loader flung a bullet into the man's belly and he keeled over. The other outlaws were taken at disadvantage. They jumped up, startled and unsure, not knowing who or where the enemy was. Bullets poured at them from the bushes. Another man was hit and cried out. Larry thought the man was Craw Labreu.

"Let's git outa here," Sim cried, and broke for the shelter of the trees.

The other outlaws followed at his heels. It was in their minds that they had been trapped and might be wiped out.

Hal snapped an order to his companion. "Get father to the horses before they come back. I'll stay here and keep firing till you're across the slough, then I'll join you."

With Tolt on one side of him and Larry on the other, each supporting him just below the armpit, Logan waded through the water. They heard the booming of Hal's rifle and twice at least an answering shot. They were in the shadow of a cypress at the edge of the far bank when there came to them the sound of horses splashing into the slough. They caught sight of riders crossing a hundred yards below them. Larry counted six horsemen, one leaning forward and clinging to the horn of his saddle. That must be the wounded man Craw, the fellow Hal had hit. The outlaws were breaking camp in a panic. They had probably left a dead man there. One worry jumped to young Harville's mind. The fleeing bad men would pass close to the knoll where the mounts of the rescuers were tied. If they caught sight of them they would know from how small a force they were running. They might return, or at east take the saddled horses with them.

His two assistants were helping Perry Logan out of the water when Hal joined them at the knoll. The four horses were still tied to the saplings where they had been left an hour earlier.

They listened, to make sure the Labreus were not coming back. The sounds of their retreat had long since died away.

"They done get a bellyful, I 'low," Tolt said jubilantly. "I been promisin' myself to git one of the cusses, an' I shorely did tonight."

Hal produced a bottle of whiskey and gave it first to his father and then to Larry. Both of them were shaking with the cold from the wet clothes that clung to them. They were abstainers, but both took a deep drink. Tonight this was a much-needed medicine. Jes' Tolable said, "Here's howdy, gen'elmen!" and tilted the bottle. Young Logan helped himself to two swallows.

With some difficulty they lifted the planter to the saddle. He was an ill man, suffering a great deal of pain on account of the motion of the horse, but he shut his teeth and made no complaint. Whatever he had to endure would be nothing comparable to what had been in store for him if he had not been rescued from the hands of Gobbler Lige. He was an inordinately proud man. It would not hurt his vanity to have it known that he had been brutally kicked, but he would be unhappy all his life if it were known that he had been stripped and horsewhipped like some Negro caught stealing a pig.

CHAPTER XXVI

A GUEST AT HILLCREST

THE ride back to the ferry was intolerably long both to the major and to Larry. Young Harville was not entirely recovered from the accident, and he had set his body to too hard a task. He was so completely exhausted that he slumped in the saddle and his shoulders sagged.

Hal noticed how he was shaking. "You're chillin'," he said.

That he was having a chill, Larry admitted, but there was nothing to do about that now.

"We'll feed you quinine, boy, when we get you to Hillcrest," he promised.

Cully Sanderson was waiting for them at the bayou and he ferried them across. Tolt gave him a sketchy account of their adventure. The ferryman had seen nothing of the outlaws. They had probably recovered from their fright, slipped back to find the camp deserted, and were busy moving it to another place. Jes' Tolable was of opinion that they would not remain in the district much longer if Craw Labreu was able to travel but would try to slip through the patrolled road leading to Texas. The Gobbler must know that all the settlers in the neighborhood would be rising against his gang.

When they reached Big Hollow Hal proposed that his father stay with Doctor Watkins. The major would not consent. He wanted to get home where guards could be set and all of them safeguarded. Watkins agreed to go with them to Hillcrest and stay a day or two, since just now he had no serious cases. The doctor had a more personal reason for going. Lige Labreu might pick him up again to treat his wounded son Craw, and this time he might not get back alive.

Watkins hitched up his buggy and Perry Logan was helped into it, after which the small cavalcade continued to Hillcrest.

Larry stopped at the side road leading to Hillcrest and said something about going home accompanied by Tolt. Hal overrode the suggestion with such abrupt decision there could be no doubt of his sincerity.

"You're white as a sheet," he said. "A fool could see you're sick. You're going to stay right here till you're well. Mother will see one of the girls nurses you, and she'll boss the job herself. Jes' Tolable is going to stay with us, too. We might need that darned old muzzle-loader of his again. Early in the mo'ning I'll send a boy to tell Colonel Harville you are here."

He did not want to be any trouble, Larry said.

"It would be too doggoned bad if we put ourselves out a mite for you," Hal broke out, with obvious sarcasm. "You come along, fellow. We'll let you know when you've worn out yore welcome."

Within five minutes of their arrival everybody at Hillcrest was awake and busy. In the kitchen the cook was making coffee and rolling out a batch of biscuits. Upstairs the maids prepared beds for the guests. Mrs. Logan helped Hal put her husband to bed and later gave him coffee and a dish of floating island. He declined the hot biscuits and bacon she offered. Though concerned at the major's condition, Sallie Logan was radiant with happiness at the unexpected safe return of the head of the house.

While the others were making preparations to take care of the arrivals and Jes' Tolable was still at the stable seeing the animals were fed, Larry saw Diane alone for one brief minute.

She came into the parlor where he was waiting, her eyes eager and shining with the deepened color of strong emotion. She said, in a lowpitched husky voice, "Hal has told us everything you have done."

Larry was embarrassed, yet delighted at the warmth of her gratitude. "I got the idea we might rescue your father in the night, so I told Hal and he said we would try it," he explained. "It was Jes' Tolable who really did it all. He guessed right about the camp and guided us there and planned what to do. I just went along."

"You just went along," she echoed, fond scorn in her voice. "All you did was—everything. You organized this rescue. You crept out and freed father while these murderers were lying all around. Before that you saved me from that wild animal, and lent us the ransom money. You have broken up this silly, terrible family feud. Is all that nothing?" She finished with a sob choking her throat.

He said, a smile on his white, tired face. "It's a lot if it has made us friends.. His grimy hands went out and took her small one in his. "I want to talk about that . . . some day."

Larry was covered with filth and mud to the waist. His hands and face were bramble-scratched. There was a dirty bandage around his head. But to this girl who could not keep the love-light out of her eyes no man had ever looked so beautiful.

A colored girl walked into the room with some quinine capsules and a glass of water on a platter. "Doctor Watkins says for you-all to take two of these now," she told the guest. "Soon as you have drunk some coffee and et some food I'm to show you where you sleeps at. Doctor 'lows he will be in to see you soon as he has got Major Logan fixed up good."

Though Larry was very tired, he did not enjoy looking so much worse than any tramp he had ever seen. He asked Diane to have the boy Hal was sending to Colonel Harville in the morning bring back some decent clothes for him.

Twenty minutes later he was in bed wearing one of Rod's nightgowns. The chill was over, and he was burning with fever. Doctor Watkins came in and gave instructions to the middle-aged colored man who had valeted Larry while he was bathing and making ready for bed. There was not much to be done except see the patient had plenty of quinine and was kept comfortable. Watkins left him a sleeping powder in case he needed it, with a promise to look in next morning.

Larry did not find it easy to sleep. His mind was full of what he had seen and done in the past few hours, of the perilous adventure and its happy finale. He fell asleep at last dreaming of the girl.

CHAPTER XXVII

TRAPPED

GOBBLER LIGE had made a mistake, though he did not intend to admit it. The bitter reproaches of Brad and the others were justified. He ought to have rubbed out Perry Logan instead of holding him for ransom. His inordinate love of money had betrayed him. They had stayed too long in the Cache bottom. By this time they ought to have been well on their way to Texas.

Now he was in a tight. They had lost one of their men, a desperado they had picked up at Fort Smith after breaking jail. That could not be helped. It was an incident of their way of life. Men who lived outside the law could expect to die young. What worried Lige was the condition of his son Craw. He was hurt too badly to travel. It stood out like a jagged flash of lightning on a dark night that the net was closing in on them. They had to get away now—before daybreak—or it might be too late. His men were getting panicky and were blaming him. The only haven they could see was Texas. If he did not take them there at once they would bolt.

THEY had stopped in an oak slash to bandage Craw's wound. He had been shot in the chest and could go no farther, though he kept protesting that if they would fix him up and stop the bleeding he could make it all right. The man was desperately afraid they would leave him here alone—to die in the swamp or to be taken to the gallows at Fort Smith. He knew that the ruling thought in each of their minds was how best to save himself.

"We'll take you to Doc Watkins, son, and have him fix you up nice," Lige said, after they had done the best they could for him. "Don't you git scared. Yore old pappy will see you through."

They lifted Craw to a saddle and headed for the bayou. Since they had to get away secretly they could not take the ferry but had to follow the longer route by the ford.

Brad dropped back from the lead to talk with his father. "If we take Craw to Watkins, the doc will spread the word soon as we've gone and they'll be on our tails quicker than scat," he said. "We won't have a dead man's chance. They'll telegraph ahead that we're coming."

The bleak eyes of Gobbler Lige looked into those of his son. They were blank and expressionless, with something in them remote and inhuman. He said, gently, "We ain't a-goin' to Doc Watkins."

Brad looked away. He did not ask what Lige meant. He did not want to know. A shiver ran up and down his spine.

"I'd better git back in the lead," he said, "seeing as I know the way to the ford and Sim don't."

"Don't wait for me and Craw when you git to the ford," Lige ordered. "And after you git across turn south."

"You mean—not to take the road for Big Hollow?"

"I said go south. I'll be with you right soon."

The eyes of the son dropped. "Whatever you say," he mumbled.

Lige fell in beside the wounded man. "How you makin' it, son?" he asked.

Craw clung to the saddle horn with both hands. There were beads of moisture on his clammy forehead. "How much further is it?" he gasped.

"Not far now to the ford, and only a little ways from there."

"You-all won't leave me, will you?" Craw pleaded.

"Long as you're alive I'll stay right with you. I'm gonna give you a rest at the ford and let the others ride on so as the doc will be dressed and ready for you."

"He'll fix me up so I can go on with you, won't he?"

"Bet yore boots. We'll take him with us to look after you."

Lige supported the wavering body of his son. "Jes' a li'l bit further, Craw. We kin see the bayou now through the trees."

When they reached the ford the others were no longer in sight.

"If I was to rest mebbe you could bring the doc to me," Craw said feebly.

"A good idea, son. Stick it another minute till we git across. You're gonna have a long rest."

When they reached the deepest part of the ford Lige let his horse drop back till its head nosed the flank of the other animal. The crash of his revolver whipped across the bayou. For a moment the grip of Craw's fingers on the saddle horn held the body balanced. As they relaxed it plunged headfirst into the sluggish water.

Lige did not throw back his head and gobble. He looked down into the dark waters that covered his son, shocked at the terrible finality of what he had just done. A sense of impending doom shuttled through his mind.

Before Craw's startled horse could reach dry land he caught the bridle. His weight on the near stirrup, he unsaddled the animal. Blanket and saddle he dropped into the bayou, then slipped the bridle from the gelding's head. Swinging the rein, he struck the freed horse a sharp blow with the bit. It splashed forward, scrambled up the bank, and disappeared in the brush. The bridle Labreu flung into the stream.

A quarter of an hour later he caught up with the rest of the party.

Sim asked, "Where's Craw?"

The others had stopped when Lige galloped up and were grouped around. Their eyes all centered on their leader.

"I've got bad news, boys," Lige said. "He fell off'n his horse and got drowned. I couldn't make out to save him."

None of them said anything. The clothes of Lige were not wet. He had not been in the water. They remembered the sound of a shot that had drifted faintly to them.

Lige continued, bravely cheerful. "I've lost my youngest boy, but I can see it's for the best. He was a mighty sick man—shot through the lungs. He couldn't of lived long. But long enough to be dragged to Fort Smith and hanged, dying though he was. And that ain't all. He knew our plans—to cut across the Choctaw Nation and head for the Brazos. They would of deviled them outa the pore boy shore as sin. He died nice and easy. We got to know it's a heap better for him to be through his misery."

Brad said hoarsely, "I reckon you're right." He swung his horse round and started down the road.

THEY traveled all night and when daylight broke tied up in the brush on the banks of the White River. They had no food with them and dared not go scouting for any at the farm houses in the vicinity. Their hope of safety lay in getting across the state without being discovered. During the day they grumbled and cursed at their luck, blaming one another and particularly Lige for having led them into this section. Yet they were careful not to make their complaints too violent and too personal, for they had a deep-seated fear of their leader. None of them wanted him gobbling over his body. That he had killed Craw they felt sure. Privately they agreed that it had been wise and a kindness to the wounded outlaw. But hard though they were, the thought of a father destroying his own son shocked them.

The fugitives slept a good deal during the day. They took turns in staying awake to watch the horses and guard against the approach of enemies.

A towheaded boy out hunting stumbled on their camp. He stopped at the edge of the small clearing, startled at the sight of so many armed men sleeping. His instinct

warned him of danger and he back-tracked softly unobserved. He hurried home to tell his father what he had seen.

The farmer did not pay much heed to his son's story, but a few hours later a passing neighbor stopped to tell him that word had come by telegraph for law officers to be on the lookout for the Labreu gang. The men notified the sheriff of the county that there were campers in the brake by the river and a posse was quickly organized.

To the outlaws the attack came as a complete surprise. Before they could reach cover one of them was killed and another shot in the leg. The wounded man was Sim Labreu. Before he could crawl to his horse he was captured. His father and brother, with Cad Miller, managed to mount and break through the trap. They galloped away wildly, following the same road they had taken in the night. But this time they were riding north. In a corn field they found a hiding place till dark.

It was clear to the bandits that at present they must give up the attempt to reach Texas. They were too hot to try so long a journey. In every county they crossed, officers would be waiting for them. Lige could think of one spot where nobody would be looking for them. That was in the Cache slough. They had last been seen thirty miles away from it. Since they had been driven out of it, with the loss of three men in all, their hunters would not think them fools enough to return. If they could get back unobserved they would be safe for a few days. They had left plenty of food at Spook Point. Once there, they could pick it up and move to another camp. In the event they were discovered and the hunt got too hot they could cross the bayou and hole up at the deserted Flynn place. The house had the reputation of being haunted and most of the natives, both white and colored, avoided it as they would the plague.

When night fell they took the road again, traveling fast as they could safely drive their mounts. By-passing Big Hollow, they made a wide circuit around the village. Unseen by anyone, they forded the bayou and rode into the swamp. The moon was high when they reached their old camping ground at Spook Point.

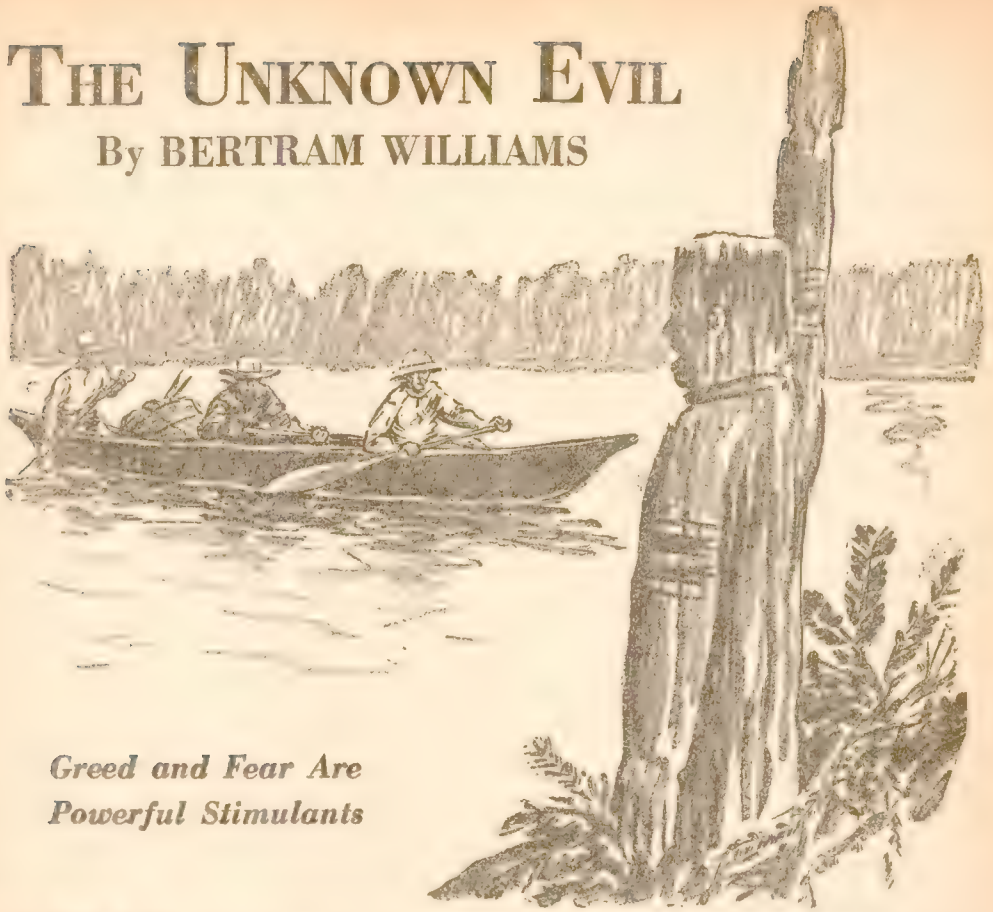
Brad swung from the saddle, stiff from the long ride. His stomach was flat as an empty mail sack. "Food first off," he said. "I'm so dad-gummed hungry I could eat a polecat."

Lige still sat his horse, narrowed eyes sweeping the site of the camp they had left twenty-four hours earlier. There were several things wrong about the set-up. They had left a dead man lying beside the fire. His body was gone. There had been sacks of provisions hanging from the limbs of trees and cooking equipment on the ground. The sacks were nowhere to be seen. Neither were the dutch oven, the fry pan, the coffee pot. The rifle and money belt of the dead man had been taken. Somebody had been here and made a thorough clean-up.

(*To Be Concluded in the Next* SHORT STORIES)

THE UNKNOWN EVIL

By BERTRAM WILLIAMS



Greed and Fear Are Powerful Stimulants

"WHAT you make o' that guy, Gaiser?" Dooley asked, indicating a gray little man leaning over the rail of the river steamer. "On the *comprador's* list he's down as Edward Lanch. Two gets you ten it's an alias."

Gaiser glanced at Lanch, who certainly did have a furtive look. "Could be. You meet all kinds in these South American countries—killers, draft-dodgers, bank tellers who got their accounts mixed and suchlike. Still, if he's on the lam he'd be below out o' sight."

"Here—on this tub? Not him, nor no one else. Hell, he was fools ever to have come up this blasted river. No rubber here, and if there was, we ain't got the dough to buy any quantity. Say, did you mention bank tellers?"

Gaiser grinned. "Figuring our friend there is one?"

"He's the type. I often seen pitchers of them in the New York papers, and they all got a Sunday-school-teacher look like him."

Gaiser, who was a big, coarse-faced man, slower of wit than his partner, nodded. "Well, he don't look no mining man nor rubber planter. S'pose we go pump the *comprador* 'bout him?"

"I already done it," Dooley replied. "This Lanch guy is booked for Masuki."

"Nothing up there but jungle and wild Injuns; leastways, I never heard o' anything else."

"It's the things you don't hear about that are worth looking into. Something tells me that this Lanch bird is our meat. Got a pile o' baggage in the hold—all sorts o' boxes and cases. Wouldn't carry a lot o' junk if he wasn't meaning to make a long stay."

Gaiser nodded. "Sure. He means to camp in this blasted bit o' hell till the dicks back home wipe his case from their books; then he'll make for Rio or B. A. and have himself a time with the loot. Wonder where it's cached."

"That's our problem from now on," Dooley declared.

The two men had first met at Manaos on the Amazon. The port had taken on new importance since the world shortage of rubber. Numerous representatives of America and Britain were there, seeking concessions or making inquiries as to the availability of plantation land. Dooley and Gaiser were ex-oilmen from the Venezuelan fields who had drifted down to the big river in the hope of picking up some easy money. A mutual contempt for the finer scruples had drawn them together. Pooling their resources, they had taken passage up the Negro in the hope of buying sufficient wild rubber to make a profit. But the further they traveled the more discouraging were the tales they heard.

IN THAT cramped space it was not difficult to strike up an acquaintance with Lanch.

Though pleasant enough, he was reserved about himself and his business in such a place.

"Can't make head or tail of the guy," Dooley reported. "What would a shrimp like him be doing in that up-river jungle country?"

Gaiser grinned complacently. "I was chewing the rag with the engineer o' this scow last night. Asked him if things ever happened in the tall timber here. 'A-plenty,' he says, and goes on to tell me about a parcel of emeralds being stolen only a few weeks ago near Bogota. Says he thinks the robbers went southeast 'stead o' beating it to the coast. We're not far from the Colombian border here."

"What of it?"

"Use your bean, man. Who would pull a hold-up like that? Yanks, o' course. And where would the stones ultimately go? The States. Now see here." He produced a map of northern South America and spread it on the deck. "That stunt occurred in the Llange Mountains right where this Masuki tributary rises."

Dooley laughed derisively. "Where the guy that made the map *thinks* it rises. And for why should the loot be hidden in the jungle?"

"There might be a dozen reasons. What do *you* think this Lanch bird is going up a creek like the Masuki for—to catch alligators?"

"I don't know," Dooley admitted. "But I'm going to find out."

Under the intimacy of mutual discomforts Lanch succumbed to the skilled pumping of Dooley. He was, he confessed, a botanist, bound on an errand of considerable scientific importance.

"The fact is, gentlemen, I'm after a rare specimen of plant life that is said to grow only in northwestern Brazil. And I don't mind telling you there are others also anxious to secure the same—er—thing."

"No picnic going up them branch rivers," Dooley observed.

"No, it isn't. And I am told this expedition of mine is exceptionally dangerous." At their curious looks, he seemed suddenly aware that he had said too much, and made an attempt to turn the conversation.

A few days later the steamer nosed in toward the western bank to discharge freight at a small river port. Gaiser watched the scene moodily.

"We were fools ever to come this far," he confided to Dooley. "We'll be broke when we get back to Manaos."

"Forget Manaos. We'll disembark at the next stop above Masuki, then drop down again by canoe."

"What's the idea?"

"Lanch. We're going to trail that bird to rainbow's end."

"But how d'you know he ain't one of these scientists, what they call 'em—research engineers?"

"An old gag all over South America. Every crook or foreigner who doesn't want his business known lets on he's a big-game hunter or a geologist or an explorer. The woods are lousy with 'em."

Gaiser grunted. "What's your theory? A spy for Hitler?"

"Ain't got none—yet. Tomorrow this Lanch gets off at Masuki. I've arranged with the skipper to drop us off at Punta Piedras, thirty kilometers farther up. We'll hire a canoe and trail the doc to his hidie-hole."

"Pablo said this Lanch might be after orchids. What's them?"

Dooley smiled at his partner's ignorance. "A kind o' flower you buy at the fancy florists. Queer-looking weeds; I've seen 'em

marked as high as five dollars each, though."

"Another lie then. Stands to sense a man wouldn't come all this way to get something he could buy at the first dago flower shop in the block."

MASUKI was nothing more than a collection of palm-thatched huts huddled together on a mudbank above the dirty brown waters of the Negro. A few canoes were moored at the piles of a rotting wharf; but nothing stirred in the village, and the only sign of life was a somnolent goat.

"Some mudscape, eh?" Dooley surveyed the scene with disgust. In broken Portuguese he questioned the mestizo canoeman as to the chances of obtaining supplies and equipment at the settlement.

The fellow spread out his hands. "You must ask of the Senhor Noronha. But no one journeys up the Masuki. It is accursed."

Noronha was a swarthy Brazilian who kept the only store and drinkshop in the village. He greeted his visitors with a sardonic grin.

"What, more gringos! And so soon."

"We want to a hire a piragua and crew to go up this infernal creek of yours," Dooley said.

"A piaragua? The only one available was hired by a gringo yesterday. There are dugouts to be had, though I doubt if you could induce any of these Indian dogs to accompany you; they do not like the Masuki. Ah, yes, the little gringo, the collector of plants? For an enormous sum he hired Pablo Santassa and his son to take him upstream. A friend of yours, senhores?"

Dooley shook his head. Neither he nor Gaiser knew very much about travel in South America away from the beaten track, and the fact that transport might be difficult, perhaps impossible, to obtain came as a shock.

Maybe it would be well to take this greaser into their confidence to a certain extent.

"So he told you he was after plants, eh? The fact is, senhor, he's a dangerous criminal wanted by the police of North America and —and we've been sent after him."

Noronha bowed politely, a gleam of doubt in his black eyes. "He said perhaps he might be followed by other collectors of plants. A poor place, the upper Masuki, even for one who flees from justice."

"Well, he would be safe there—or thinks he would," Dooley suggested.

Noronha listened to a long exposition of their wants and shrugged helplessly. He was desolated, but what could he do? These Indian pigs were too lazy to paddle to their fishnets unless hunger drove them to it.

"We'll have to let him in on it," Dooley whispered. He turned to the storekeeper. "See here, senhor, that hombre Lanch goes up-river for a treasure he has cached there. Maybe he knows of some way out other than returning through here. So you see the need of hurry. And—and perhaps—"

Noronha grinned. "I might help you? The senhor is now talking more to the point. A criminal you said? They are the rule, not the exception, in this part of the world. But one who has the impudence to use my aid in carrying away his ill-gotten booty—ah, senhores, that I could not permit."

Dooley was slightly taken aback by the fellow's ready understanding. "If — if we should chance to capture this Lanch after he has uncovered his—er—ill-gotten plunder, I am sure my government will pay you a substantial reward for your services."

"*Cra,* senhor, I likewise am sure. Though it will not be an affair of governments."

Dooley tried to make his weasel-like features appear candid. "A third of the treasure then; you to furnish the equipment, of course."

"I am afraid a single canoe and a couple of Indians will be all I can muster. But the *fugitiva*—what of him?"

Dooley smirked. "We can decide that later."

"So you promised him a third, did you?" Gaiser snarled when they were outside. "There may not be enough for two, let alone three."

"Promises cost nothing," Dooley soothed. "It was the only way to get action."

Gaiser looked doubtful. "I think that greaser will be awkward to handle."

"Not him. He'll take us right up to the cache and probably save us the bother of disposing of Lanch."

Gaiser nodded slowly. "And then?"

"Then maybe something will happen to the illustrious Senhor Noronha."

"It will, hey? I suppose you figure to

shoot him when he's asleep or something like that? And what about the canoe Indians?"

"You're a nice fellow, Otto, and fairly bright too, but when it comes to—er—getting rid of undesirable aliens, you're a trifle prehistoric." He rummaged in the bottom of his suitcase and produced a small blue bottle without a label.

"A pinch of this powder in the honorable senhor's coffee and he'll have no use for any share in the swag. The Indians'll think it's death from natural causes, and I don't reckon there's anyone in these parts capable of performing an autopsy, even if they wanted to."

Gaiser regarded his partner with a peculiar expression. "How come you to have that stuff, Dooley?"

"Oh, it's as well to be prepared for eventualities in a country like this, and I'm no gunman and awkward with a knife."

THE canoe provided by Noronha was a mere hollowed out log with barely sufficient space for the three whites and two Indians to squat. Dooley noted with some alarm that Noronha had brought along a carbine as well as the machete at his belt. He and Gaiser forthwith produced the automatics which they had hitherto kept in their suitcases.

Noronha grinned when he saw the weapons. "It is well, senhores, that I accompany you. Even in the lower reaches of the Masuki there are jaguars and large constrictors which sometimes attack travelers from overhanging boughs, not to mention the caymans. Your toy pistols would merely irritate them into added fierceness. Should the *fugitiva,* this doctor who hunts for plants, have reached the higher waters before we overtake him—well, there is the other peril of which we know nothing.

Dooley looked uneasy. It is difficult for the city-bred man to imagine wild animals outside of a zoo. Now this smiling Brazilian spoke of fierce beasts as a matter of course and hinted at a further danger.

They camped that night on a strip of beach behind which the jungle rose a solid wall of green. Dooley's nerves were not soothed by the frequent splashes in the water alongside and the mysterious rustlings behind him. Obeying an impulse and without consulting his partner, he told the Brazilian all he knew about Lanch and how they were trailing him on the mere suspicion of some secret hoard.

Noronha rolled a cigarette slowly as he listened. "I am glad, senhor, that you have seen fit to—how you call it?—lay your cards on the stable. The little doctor, you say, boasted that one box alone would be sufficient to carry away all he sought. Of a surety, he was indiscreet when he confided that."

"Well, he was sorta excited for one thing; and another, he didn't—"

"Know you, senhor. Exactly. Be not offended. What he seeks we shall in due time learn. There is, however, this matter of the 'Evil.'"

Gaiser, was attempting to follow the conversation, broke in. "There he goes again, trying to throw a scare into us."

Noronha listened politely while Dooley translated. "The senor is mistaken; I am not endeavoring to put fear into either of you. *Cra,* no! Did I not say at our first meeting that even the Indians dislike to venture very far up the Masuki. Why—I do not know. When questioned, they merely grunt a word which can only be translated as *el malvado,* the Evil. Perhaps it is but some foolish superstition, and again there might be a very real danger. This Santassa and his son, of whom I spoke before, are natives of another department and would be indifferent to local gossip. The different tribes mock at hocus-pocus other than their own."

"I don't believe he's bluffing about this unknown menace," Dooley confided to Gaiser. "But there's another one he don't know nothing of, and that's in the little bottle I showed you."

Gaiser grunted and became thoughtful.

A week of steady paddling brought the travelers to the first of the rapids. Here it was necessary to portage. Though Dooley managed to shirk his share of the toil with the provisions and equipment, he was compelled to help with the canoe. Soon his hands were bleeding from a dozen cuts and abrasions, and his face a mass of sores from festered insect bites. Gaiser, whose hide was impervious even to the stinging mosquitoes, was the type of man who cannot desist from jeering at one in misfortune.

"Haw! Haw!" he guffawed. "You look

like one of them he-blooded red men of the great open rivers! This is the existence, hey?"

AT THE third portage Gaiser was making the last load by himself with the two suitcases. Moisture had rotted the stitches of one, and it burst open, spilling the contents on the ground. Gaiser cursed and started to pick up the scattered articles. Among them was the small phial Dooley had shown him. Gaiser squatted back on his haunches, frowning with the weight of an idea. After a while he pried out the cork of the bottle and emptied out the white powder it contained.

There was no one in sight; the others were reloading the canoe further up the creek. The rapids at that spot ran through a kind of limestone formation, and the trail alongside was littered with pieces of the soft white rock. Gaiser's small eyes sparkled with self-approbation. He ground a fragment of the limestone with his heel, carefully sifted it, and poured the resulting powder into the phial. Chuckling to himself, he resumed his way.

A curious booming noise was heard that night. It seemed to come from up-river and, while intermittent, was eerie in the extreme. For the first time on the journey Noronha appeared worried. He frowned repeatedly and looked at the two Indians, who took no pains to conceal their uneasiness.

Dooley glanced up from his hammock. "What's wrong now?" he snarled. "Ain't scared of that auto horn up there, are they? What is it, anyhow? There's more damn row on this ditch than at Broadway and Forty-second."

"I do not know what it is, senhor. But it is no bird or beast."

"Maybe it's some tribe of savages?"

Noronha shook his head. "There are Indians in the up-river jungle, but they are harmless."

"Perhaps this foghorn business is that Evil you're always hinting of?"

"Who shall say, senhor?"

Dooley did not answer. That their quest would be successful, he had not the slightest doubt. No white man would brave the discomforts of such a journey unless a fortune lay at the end of it. So far he had seen nothing of any wild animals and was beginning to doubt their existence. A strange noise in the jungle meant nothing to Dooley, and the fact that Noronha was disturbed actually pleased him. He did not trust the man, but it might be necessary to keep in his good graces till their objective was reached. After that—

IN THE morning the two Indians were gone.

"Pigs that they are!" Noronha cursed. "They know more about these waters than I guessed."

Grumbling, the three men thrust the dugout into the stream and began to paddle. Less than three miles up, the river widened unexpectedly almost to the proportions of a lake.

"Ain't that an island or is it a fork?" Dooley asked, pointing to a tongue of land directly ahead.

It was just after dawn and the tropical sun had not yet had time to evaporate the steaming mists from the surface of the water. Gaiser was the first to see the thing.

"What's that?" he whispered hoarsely. He stopped paddling, and for a moment the canoe drifted broadside to the current.

"Cra, be careful!" Noronha growled. He looked up. *"Por Dios!"*

The island was wedge-shaped, the sharp end pointing downstream. At the extreme apex stood a roughly carved idol, one arm raised in an awkward posture as if warning intruders away. The body and face were daubed in brilliant ochre and vermilion, and though the thing was fully ten feet high and had evidently been hewn out of a single log, there was no attempt at proportion in the head and limbs. The crudity of the image would not have scared the least sophisticated of savages were it not for the weird noise that issued every now and then from the half-open mouth—a queer mournful wail. Even Noronha was impressed.

"It is what the Indians call a *quirachê*—a death idol," he muttered. "Though never yet have I heard of one that cried out like a cur at the moon." He crossed himself.

Gaiser laughed. He was already ashamed of his first show of alarm, and like others of similar mental caliber sought to cover it by scoffing at another.

"Reg'lar Statoo of Liberty, ain't it? Hey, greaser, better go swim the channel if you don't like our 'Welcome to the City' stuff!"

The Brazilian did not understand the phrase, but he knew he was being jeered at; he gave Gaiser a black look.

Dooley muttered impatiently. He was not in the least afraid of any man-made device. A splash in the river or a faint sound in the bush might cause him to start nervously, but this emblem of savagery did not even arouse his curiosity.

"I've seen bigger totems in the Northwest," he said indifferently. "Let's be going before the sun starts its stuff."

"But the noise, senhor?" Noronha protested.

"Simple. A funnel at the back of the head, with a little siren contraption inside. We used to make 'em out of paper and slivers of wood when I was a kid. Notice how the thing is quiet when there ain't no wind?"

"Let's give it the once-over," Gaiser suggested, pushing with his paddle in the shallow water. He halted in the act of stepping ashore at Noronha's exclamation. The print of a shoe showed plain and fresh in the sand at the base of the idol.

Silently they backed water till they were under cover of the mangroves on the opposite bank. A short distance down and they were opposite a clearing in the middle of which stood a tent. There were the ashes of a fire and numerous boxes and impedimenta scattered around, but no signs of life.

"The end of the rainbow trail!" Dooley murmured. "That's Lanch's headquarters or I'm a Bulgarian bassoon player. Guess he's gone after the plunder." Now that the actual crisis was reached, he suddenly remembered that their quarry was accompanied by two or more Indians who would probably put up some resistance. "Might have some of them blowpipe things," he muttered.

"Back to our last camp," Noronha ordered. "Of a certainty, the Senhor Doctor would not leave his treasure unguarded, and should we land, our tracks might arouse suspicion. Those Santassas are like animals in that they can smell the presence of strangers."

THERE was no moon, and their fire was made in a sheltered spot where no gleam could betray them. Dooley watched the coffee pot boil while the others dragged the canoe to a place of concealment.

Halfway through the meal Gaiser set his cup down untasted. He grinned to himself as if enjoying some secret joke. In response to Noronha's stare he rummaged through the suitcase alongside and fished out Dooley's small blue phial. He held it up to the light with a chuckle, and it was evident that it was now empty.

"Drink hearty, greaser. Our friend here has just poisoned your coffee. Mine, too—" he added with a scowl at Dooley.

Noronha caught only the word, "poisoned," and observed Gaiser's grin. Without hesitation he flung the scalding contents of his cup into Gaiser's face, and while the big man pluttered blindly, he slashed him across the throat with his machete.

"So! You would poison me, you outlanders!" He swung round from the dead man to the cowering Dooley. "You, who brewed this stuff, shall drink what is left in the pot." The menacing machete left Dooley no choice, but barely an hour later he sat up and tried to think. Very much to his surprise he was still alive and apparently in good health. Things had turned out rather differently than he had intended, though now he was not altogether displeased. Undoubtedly, his late partner had substituted some harmless powder for the poison, and that Gaiser himself should be the one to be taken for granted as a poisoner tickled his sense of humor. It was, however, unfortunate that this swarthy Brazilian had also seized all the arms in their camp—this he observed by a cautious look around. Also, it was quite possible that after Lanch had been disposed of, Noronha might not care to share the treasure with one whom he might still half suspect of attempted murder.

Noronha broke in on his reflections. He made no reference to the fact that, after all, no one had been poisoned, but said, "Get up! Let us take the canoe, *amigo,* and see if the Senhor *Fugitiva* has returned."

The Brazilian's sleepy nonchalance had disappeared. Under his directions, Dooley helped to drag the body of Gaiser down to the river bank.

"It may be that this dead senhor merely played a foreign joke," Noronha said thoughtfully. "That I do not know. It was unfortunate we could not converse with one another. But you and I, Senhor Dooley, we understand each other perfectly, no?"

Dooley nodded. While he was glad Gai-

ser was out of the way, he realized that unless something like a miracle occurred, his own life was very precarious. He might have been in on Gaiser's "joke."

As they paddled noiselessly to their former position they saw that Lanch had returned. A fire was burning in front of the tent, and the little doctor was clearly visible bending over a small wooden box. Whatever was inside appeared to please him. He gazed at the contents for a while, grinned, took another peep, then carefully closed the lid.

Dooley had time to take in the details of the camp. Instead of facing any beach, a site had been chosen where the bank was at least eight feet above water level. Both he and Noronha had noticed that morning that the island was overgrown with a straggling reddish-colored weed, a species of ground creeper. The little clearing where Lanch sat was practically the only spot free from this plant. There was no canoe or dugout in sight.

"Makes his men sleep elsewhere," Noronha muttered. "Humph! No telling how close they may be."

As quietly as they had come they returned to their own camp.

"Here, senhor, you will wait," Noronha ordered, motioning Dooley to get out.

"But why—when—"

"Pronto!" the Brazilian snapped. "And for your own sake be silent. Those two Santassas are men of hot temper."

He vanished into the murky darkness of the night, leaving Dooley to curse impotently. For a long time he listened for the shot that would denote Lanch's murder. But no sound came, and he remembered the other's caution for silence. The deed would be done with a machete.

With an effort Dooley roused himself and walked along the bank of the river. Although the bush grew thick here, it was not impassable. Thorny shrugs tore his flesh and clothes, clinging vines tripped him, his feet sank in the soft ooze where land and water met, and only the familiar chorus of the frogs kept him from wandering off his course. The distance was not great, but it was long after midnight before he glimpsed the dull glow of Lanch's fire through the mangroves and knew he was again opposite the scientist's camp. Recklessly he plunged through the stinking mud that was neither solid nor liquid till, exhausted, he stood shoulder-deep where he could command a view of the island.

A large log burned steadily, revealing the camp, now deserted and silent. Dooley could see the dim outline of the canoe moored to a tree by its vine painter. Of Noronha there was no sign. Dooley was a coward at heart, but greed and fear are powerful stimulants. Conquering his aversion to the river, he struck out for the island shore, reaching the dugout without mishap. To his delight he found that Noronha's carbine and one of the pistols had been left inside. Armed as he was now with lethal weapons and the advantage of surprise, he felt himself a match for either Noronha or Lanch.

WHILE the distance to the tent was short, and the brush just thick enough to conceal anyone moving in the darkness, the undergrowth of weed proved a nuisance. It clung to Dooley's feet, seriously hampering his stride; several times he was compelled to bend down and tear himself free. His hands became covered with the gummy sap it exuded when broken, and some of this stuck to his face when he slapped at mosquitoes.

With senses keyed to their highest pitch he advanced as cautiously as possible, expecting every second to discover Noronha behind the next bush.

Abruptly he came on him, a dark figure squatting on the ground. For a moment Dooley was puzzled at the man's attitude; then he saw that he was scratching vigorously at one bare leg. Dooley's lips drew back. He raised the carbine and brought the butt down with all his strength on the Brazilian's head.

Dooley chuckled silently. He, too, felt a growing irritation of the skin from the insect bites and the gashes of thorns; but whatever its cause, a similar infliction on the enemy had been useful to him that night.

Reassured by the snores which came out of the tent, he stole softly into the clearing. Evidently the treasure had been removed to a place of greater security, for the box they had noticed that afternoon contained nothing but a spray of flowers. At least it felt like that—a plant with slender petals on a vine-like stem embedded in damp moss.

Some mistake. He would investigate the

tent later and force Lanch to disclose his loot. But first he must bathe his face and arms in the stream. The itching had become intolerable. It must be the juice from that confounded weed.

To reach the water Dooley was compelled to return to the beach. He tore back through the brush to fall exhausted on the sand. The tepid water brought no relief, and after a few minutes he roused himself sufficiently to climb into the canoe and cast loose the mooring. It would never do to be found in such a state by Lanch or his Indians. In the morning, when he felt better, he would devise another plan—

EXTRACT from the diary of Doctor Edward Lanch, F.B.S.A., August 7:

"At last I have a specimen of *Cramatophyllum Masukisis* similar to the one in the Kew Botanical Gardens, London. I believe mine will be the only orchid of this species in the United States when I return to New York.

"Of course some other collector may be on my heels, but I doubt it. I took extraordinary pains to cover my trail. There were two very nice Americans on the river boat, and I am sure they believed me to be a Nazi agent or perhaps a criminal when I sidestepped their questions. What a joke it will be if I meet them again and they see that I am really a botanist.

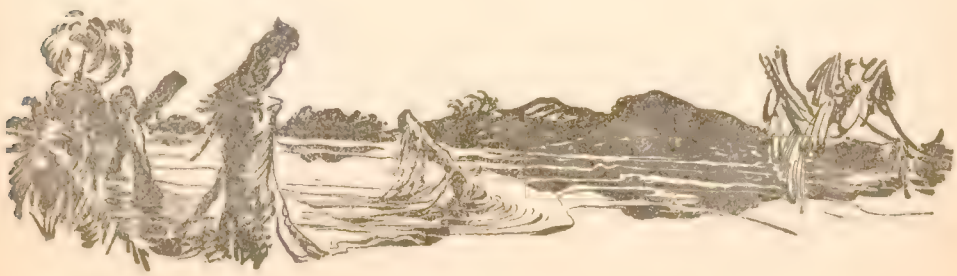
"Then there was the native storekeeper at Masuki village. I took him into my confidence to a certain extent—which was quite safe, as those fellows have no ambition and are not in the least interested in the doings of strangers. He probably put me down as one of those substitute-rubber hunters who swarm all over the tropics these days.

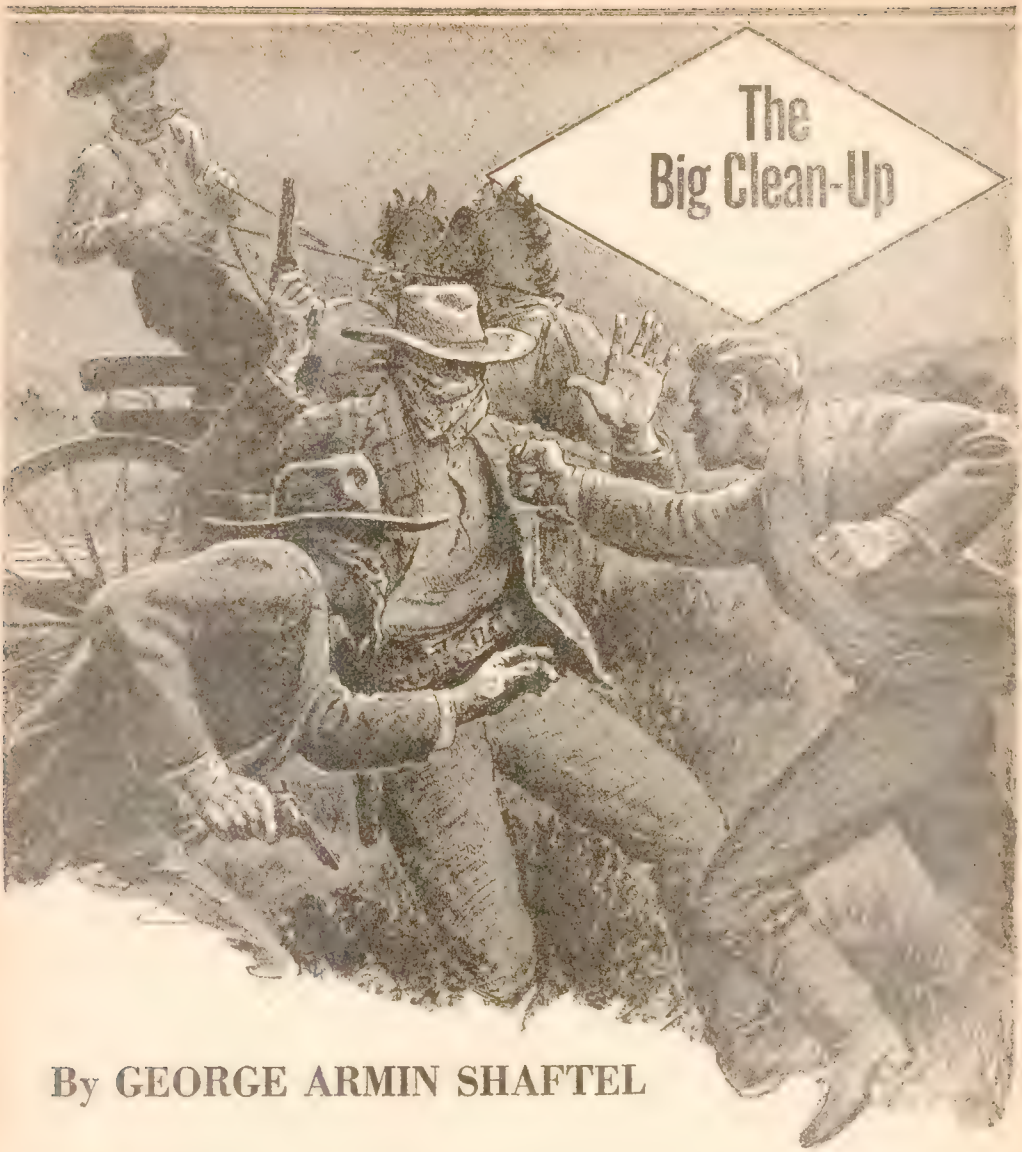
"While searching the surrounding jungle for specimens I made my headquarters on a little island in midstream, much to the worthy Santassas' disgust. Both father and son refuse to sleep here, and leave me marooned alone every night. At one end of my islet is a huge wooden idol, erected, I suppose, by some local tribe of Indians. It has a curious foghorn arrangement fashioned about the mouth which sounds a mournful note when the wind is blowing directly in the rear. Old Pablo tells me wherever these grotesque figures are placed, some evil lurks. A ridiculous superstition in this case, as the island is free from wild animals and is practically bare of the thorny shrubs which make life such a pest on the mainland. With the exception of some stunted bushes there is no vegetation save a kind of red groundvine.

Of course there might be snakes in this latter, but as I always wear high leather boots I have little fear of such reptiles. Old Pablo Santassa warned me that the sap of certain plants is extremely poisonous externally, but he speaks such a queer dialect that I do not understand half he says.

"I have had no time to explore the place, and as I hear the Santassas coming for me, I fear I never shall."

Dooley—had he been still alive and had access to the diary—would have been interested in the professor's high boots. These were a protection from other evils besides snakes.





The Big Clean-Up

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

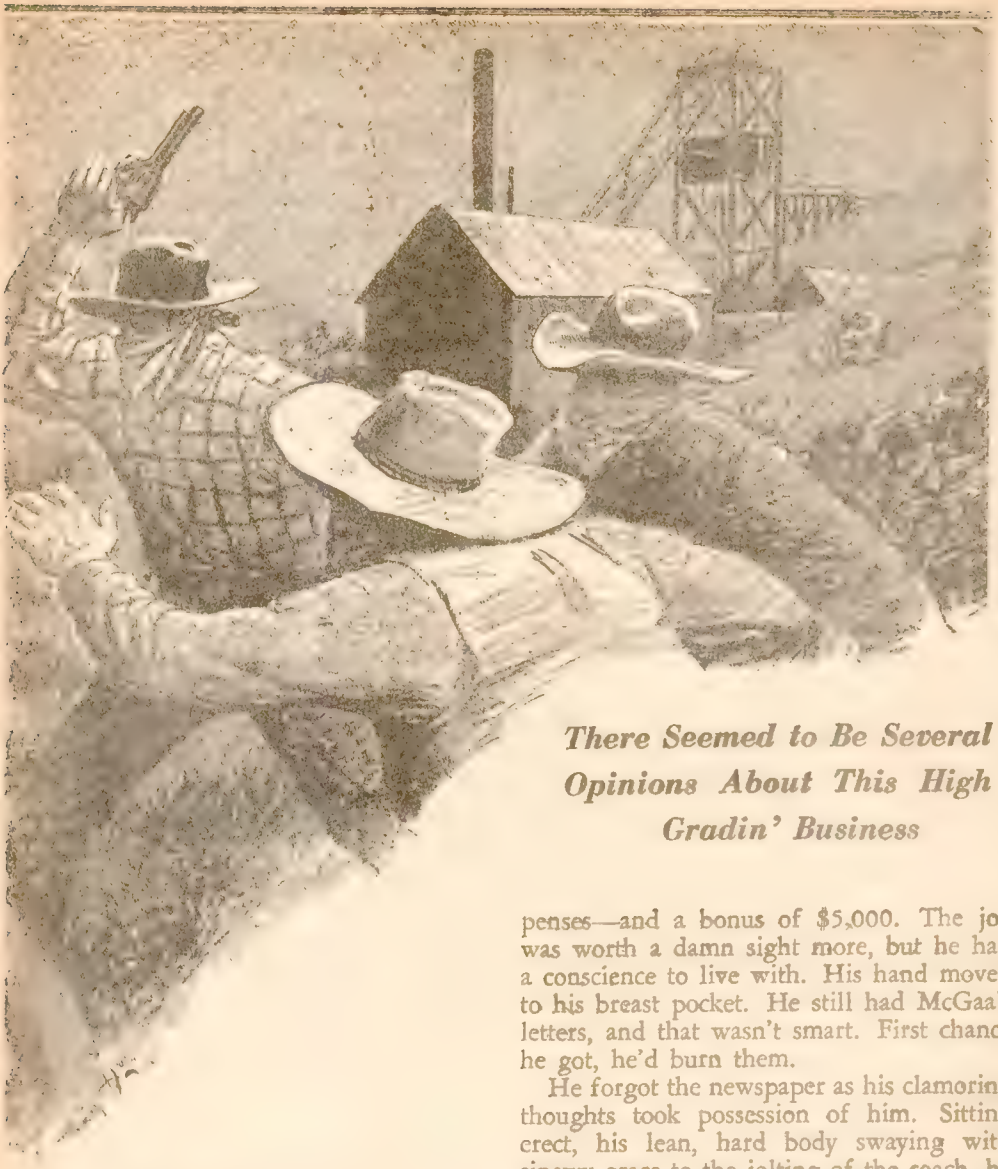
THE stagecoach lurched so badly on the rough Nevada road that John Marlin could hardly read the paper he had bought in Rhyolite. But obstinately he kept trying, for reading drew his mind from the bitter thoughts that crowded in upon him. There were a half-dozen other men and a young woman in the coach, and they were either dozing or making talk in an effort to ease the monotony of the ride to Goldfield. The woman sat opposite John Marlin, and once or twice he was aware of her eyes upon him, intent and questioning. But he kept his own moody glance upon the pages of the Rhyolite *Daily News*.

"Mind if we smoke, Miss?" someone asked.

"Of course not. I like it."

Her low voice had a lilt and a warmth and deep calm. As if, Marlin reflected, she'd seen a lot and felt a lot and never let it defeat her. But maybe she'd never had too tough a fight. Maybe— *Stop it,* he raged at himself. *You're eating your heart out. And you're going to need all the heart and guts you've got.*

Stubbornly he made himself read his pa-



There Seemed to Be Several Opinions About This High Gradin' Business

per. San Francisco was being rebuilt after the disastrous earthquake and fire. And the way the editorial writers were putting it, "'Frisco was rising like a phoenix from the ashes." . . . And down in the Imperial Valley of California, the Southern Pacific railroad was finally putting shackles on the runaway Colorado River after its flood waters had swept into Salton Sea. *Maybe that's where I'll go when I make my stake. I'll start a freight line to the railroad. I'd need a pile of cash—*

He hadn't talked money with the Goldfield people yet. He'd ask for wages, expenses—and a bonus of $5,000. The job was worth a damn sight more, but he had a conscience to live with. His hand moved to his breast pocket. He still had McGaa's letters, and that wasn't smart. First chance he got, he'd burn them.

He forgot the newspaper as his clamoring thoughts took possession of him. Sitting erect, his lean, hard body swaying with sinewy grace to the jolting of the coach, he stared unseeingly at barren dry lake and desert mountains. This Goldfield job would be tough. That was all right; his jobs were always tough. But it was wrong to be counting on the money he'd make. He should know better. Fate was an ironic witch who delighted in turning dreams into delusions. God'l'mighty, shouldn't he know? Memory unleashed a hot gray stir of pain within him, and his strong face tightened, his hard gray eyes narrowed rebelliously.

He'd grown up on a Kansas farm, an orphan taken in by a preacher uncle. He knew Dodge City and Hayes and Wichita,

and stories of cattle and trail-end cities and the great peace officers had been the ideal by which he had fashioned his life. The day he was twenty-one he was sworn in as a deputy-sheriff in Ellsworth—a gangling naive kid, full of ideals, slow to anger but slower to cool off when once aroused. And for most of the dozen years since, he'd been a peace officer. In the turbulent new land-rush towns of Oklahoma. In Arizona silver camps. In timber towns of the Northwest. Then in Alaska when new gold stampeded the venturesome onto the Yukon. He'd been a good peace officer, all right. Too good. For when a camp grew thrivingly, and he became sheriff or police chief, then politics and graft would approach him. When you got big enough, either you played ball with the local big shots, or you got out. He couldn't play ball; his Methodist upbringing was too stubborn. He got out.

I'm sick to death of rambling. Somehow I've got to root in deep and stick.

He peered out the window at the rough road ahead. There in Goldfield he had a tough fight waiting for him. A fight of vicious, stab-in-the-back bitterness. And he dreaded it with all the vivid foresight of much experience. But it was characteristic of him that he was burning with impatience to get started.

"AREN'T you Mae Britton?"

The burly rancher sitting next to John had leaned forward to ask the question, and the young woman nodded.

"Yes, I am."

In her clear, low voice was a ripple of singing warmth that played like intimate fingers upon John Marlin's nerves. He looked sharply at her and realized that she was younger than he'd first thought, just a girl. She wore an expensive traveling suit of gray broadcloth that fitted snugly a slim waist and flared to the generous curve of her bosom. She wore a tiny cap of fur on the rich mass of her red-gold hair. Her skin was creamy-white and her eyes were deep blue—cool, steady eyes that met his glance with no coquetry and no self-consciousness. She had a fine figure, he realized, and real beauty.

"Didn't I see you dealing faro at the Aurora Saloon in Tonopah?" the rancher demanded.

She nodded. "It's very likely."

The rancher's eyes traveled from her toes to her shining hair, and it was like the pawing caress of a drunk.

"I remember," he said, and suddenly he laughed. "You're the woman faro dealer who goes home with any man who breaks the bank!"

He said it loudly, and he guffawed; and the other passengers sat up and looked at him and at Mae Britton.

Spots of warm color came into her cheeks.

"What is your name?" she asked the rancher.

"I'm Al Hannon. Where you going to be dealing faro in Goldfield, Mae?"

"Mr. Hannon, once in Tonopah a mine foreman played at my table and broke the bank. I did go home with him." She was leaning forward, her lovely face intent, her low voice carrying clearly so that everyone in the coach heard. "I walked as far as his door with him, Mr. Hannon. Because I knew that if he went home alone, half-drunk as he was, he'd be robbed of his winnings. I have lots of friends in Tonopah, and I carry a derringer in my muff. As long as I was with him, no one would touch him." She sat back, and anger was a breath of high color across her face. "I'll be dealing at the Golconda in Goldfield, Mr. Hannon. Do come in. If you break the bank, I promise to walk with you. To your door, Mr. Hannon. No farther."

Hannon's face flushed as the others laughed at him.

"That'll do to tell," he said angrily, "but it doesn't fool anybody."

John Marlin caught him by the front of his coat and pulled him forward. John unlatched and shoved open the coach door, and with one short heavy blow of his fist he knocked Hannon headlong out of the moving stage onto the sandy road.

Instantly there were shouts to stop. The coach swayed on its thoroughbraces as the driver hauled his team back on their haunches.

But when Hannon was helped to his feet and came to the coach door, John Marlin blocked the way.

"You don't ride in here Hannon," he said.

Furiously Hannon started to protest. John Marlin's steady gray eyes narrowed. Abruptly Hannon turned away.

"I'll ride on top," he said thickly.

The coach started on and John leaned back; and now that the affair was over, he regretted it. *Damn it, I wanted to come into Goldfield without any fuss. I shouldn't fly off the handle like that.*

Mae Britton rose from her seat. She sat down beside him, and a delicate whiff of perfume reached his nostrils.

"Thank you, Mr. Mason," she said, low-voiced. "I won't ever forget this. But you shouldn't have knocked Hannon out of the coach."

"He had it coming to him."

She shrugged. "What he said would've been soon forgotten. But now you've made it a story that'll travel into every camp in Nevada."

"I'm sorry," he said curtly.

She looked at him, thoughtfully measuring him.

"Just the same, I'm glad you did it, Hugh Mason."

"How do you know my name?" he demanded, an edge of alarm to his voice.

"My father was Steve Britton. You ran him out of Austin, when you were Deputy United States Marshal there."

"I ran all the gamblers out."

"I know. I'm not holding it against you."

"Look here. In Goldfield my name is John Marlin."

Her warm lips curved in a faint smile, and for an instant her fingers pressed his arm.

"All right. I'll call you John Marlin. Will you come to see me at the Golconda, John?"

"I'll be pretty busy," he said, and his tone was curt.

But she kept smiling, and he felt the warm blood rushing into his face and he turned away angrily. He *would* stop in to see her—and she knew it, too.

HE WALKED down Main street to the Cody House. Goldfield looked like its chief industry was saloons. Goldfield was all lit up and crowded. The mines worked around the clock, in three shifts; and the gambling halls remained open around the clock, for there was always a shift on the streets with money to spend. A wild camp, but not a raw one. Its fleshpots were plentiful and expensive.

A room at the Cody House would be $4 a night. He reflected that a miner's wage was usually $4:50 a day, and grinned wryly. Boom camp prices.

Alone in his room, first thing he did was take two letters from his pocket. He reread them carefully. Then he touched match to them, set them in the washbowl and watched until the paper was consumed. Now his room could be searched and suspicion would find no peg to hang on.

He eyed himself in the bureau mirror. He needed a shave, but he would not have one, he decided. Lack of sleep had left a smudge of shadow under his eyes. That, too, was to the good. But he changed out of his good gray suit into worn and unmatched coat and trousers from his suitcase. In the suitcase lay two Colts .45 guns with carved bone plates in the butt. He moved them aside and took out a short, double-barreled .41 derringer and stuck it into his jacket pocket.

It was eleven o'clock by time he went out on the street again. He asked the way to the Northern Saloon, and walked down crowded Crook until he found it. And there he asked a barkeep if Steve Nagle had been in.

"No. Try the Alhambra."

In a game of stud poker at the Alhambra he found Steve Nagle—a heavy-set man with graying mustache and deep-set dark eyes that were hot with the truculent stare of a man who inwardly cringes from what he has made of himself and is afraid others may see it.

John said, "My name's Marlin. Tip Latham said to buy you a drink."

Nagle moved to the bar with him.

"Where'd you see Tip?" he demanded.

"In State Penitentiary."

"So." Nagle tossed his drink down. "You're no jailbird."

"Visitors' Day. I talked to Tip."

"You want to work in the McGaa lease?"

"Yes. Tip said you were day foreman and could take me on, if you want."

"Question is, do *you* want?"

"Go on."

"The pay is four fifty a day."

"Seems to be standard."

"You pay me twenty a day."

John Marlin's fingers tightened white-knuckled about his glass, but he merely nodded.

"Agreed."

"Report at the shaft head in the morning. You can get a 'corset cover' in any hardware store."

"A *what?*"

"Never mind."

Nagle went back to his game and John strode outside. He did not go straight to his hotel but walked the streets a while, jostled by a throng that at midnight seemed as large as at noon. The busiest spot was the intersection of Crook and Main Streets. Here on each of the four corners was a big gambling saloon—the Palace, Tex Rickard's Northern, the Hermitage and the Mohawk. Out of the sage-grown, sun-blasted desert which still surrounded it, Goldfield had burgeoned up and flowered like some lush tropical growth, unhealthy in its overrich blooming. Here were restaurants where you could buy oysters and champagne and pate de fois gras. Here you could gamble tens of thousands on the turn of a card. Here you could find handsome women lavish with their favors. Booming high, wide and handsome, Goldfield! But as he stood there, taking in its glare and noise, John Marlin felt an inner crawling of distaste. There was a rottenness here, a sickness at the very core of things, a slimy miasma that withered what it touched.

That was why he'd been summoned to Goldfield.

FUMES from the black powder blast were still strong in the entry when John Marlin started work with the men to whom the foremen had assigned him. The ore blasted down off the face of the vein glistened with dull greasy facets in the miners' lights. John set to work shoveling.

He liked the men he worked with immediately. They were a big sandy-haired Cornishman, a drawling lanky Texan, a burly Lithuanian, and a dark little Chileño. They saw at once that he was a green miner and were generous with advice. They had him shoveling muck aside while they heaved ore into the cars. They frequently examined ore fragments, he noticed. They grumbled, as if the ore wasn't pleasing them.

He had had no time to buy a lunch pail, so had no lunch. But Alwyn, the big Cornishman, sat down beside him and insisted on giving him a lavish share of his beef and bread and cabbage. Zellig, the Lithuanian, thrust a pot of compôte upon him; and the Chileño, Garcia, gave him coffee; while the Texan shared a big apple pie with him.

They had been working but five minutes, after the noon stop, when Alwyn let out a whoop. The others clustered around him and he handed them fragments of ore.

"Look at this, Jawn!"

A heavy chunk in his hand, John turned it around and around, studying it. It shone with glints of gold, greasy facets that sparkled with insolent richness.

"That's 'jewelry rock,'" the Texan told him.

The men quit shoveling. Squatting, they broke up fragments of ore and sorted them.

"It'll run twenty-five dollars a pound."

"Over thirty, I'd say!"

"Jawn!" The Cornishman turned toward John. "Catch!" And as John caught the chunk of ore Alwyn flung him, the miner said, "That'll pay off the foreman." He tossed another chunk. "That'll buy you a fine dinner at the Bon Ton. And this one is drinks for the bunch of us at the Northern. And this chunk'll buy a stack of chips at Mike Donnessy's table!"

John stood there with the rich heavy fragments in his hands, wondering what to do with them. The Texan, Daley, reached his empty lunch pail to him.

"You can carry the stuff out in the pail, John."

"You got no 'corset cover,' lad?" Alwyn asked.

"What's a 'corset cover?'"

They guffawed. Grinning, the Cornishman unbuttoned his shirt. Beneath it he was wearing a canvas jacket that was lined with pockets.

"'Jewelry rock,' Jawn—we put it into our pockets. 'Company ore'—" he jerked a thumb at the low-grade ore "—goes into the cars for the leaser."

All four of them got busy selecting rich chunks to fill John's borrowed pail. Then Zellig asked John for his shirt; and the Lithuanian took off his own shirt and with a length of wire he sewed the shirts together around the bottom so that they made a sack.

"Put on. You carry out ore in, see?"

John nodded mutely and said thanks.

"Twenty-five-dollar ore—that's as rich as it comes?" he asked.

"Gawd, no!" The Cornishman said, "Sometimes it runs as high as a hundred dollars a pound."

"A man could carry out a sizable stake!"

That struck them as funny. They guffawed, and slapped him on the back; and the Texan drawled, "Why you reckon we pay that stinkin' foreman twenty bucks a day to work here?"

John said, "Looks like everybody in Goldfield would want to work here."

"Say, you *are* new in this camp," Daley remarked. "The other leases run high-grade, too."

At quitting time, their pockets bulged like a gopher's cheeks with chunks of the richest ore. The Cornishman grinned at John, and winked.

"We come in lean, Jawn—but we go out fat!"

John frowned. "It's kind of noticeable."

Tom Alwyn guffawed.

"Don't let it fret you, chum!"

They rode the hoist to the top. The foreman, Nagle, stood at the shaft head. His dark eyes slid over them all as they stalked away, awkward of gait and heavy; but he said nothing. John thought wryly of Alwyn's phrase.

Yes. We go in lean—we come out fat.

DUSK was already dimming into night; and John accompanied big Tom Alwyn to a dark back street of Goldfield. To a shack with a sign painted on a window: Neile Husted, Assayer. They entered, and Husted came to meet them—a lean, stooped, hard-eyed man with a horse face.

"Dump it on the bench," he directed.

As they emptied their pockets and lunch pails of ore, Husted counted money and shoved it toward Tom Alwyn.

"Four hundred dollars, Alwyn."

As the Cornishman gathered up the money, he told John, "This is for the stuff I brought in yesterday. You leave the ore, Jawn, and he runs an assay on it, and pays you off next day."

John frowned. "I figured to get some dough tonight."

"You're new here, huh?" the assayer grunted. "If you want, I'll pay you one hundred dollars for your ore right now."

"But some of that will run thirty dollars a pound."

"All right, just take it somewhere else."

"Naw, leave it, Jawn," Alwyn said. "I'll share my cash with you tonight and you can pay me back tomorrow. Come on." And as they strode out, the Cornishman explained, "Y'see, chum, these assayers pay you a scant half of what they'll get for the ore, if you give them time to run an assay. But if you want your money laid right in your hand when you deliver, you get maybe just a tenth." He shrugged and laughed. "Hell, that's fair enough, considerin'."

They went to John's hotel and washed up. Then they started out, to eat and to drink.

"The Palm Grill for us tonight, Jawn. Best in town. And what's best in Goldfield, is best anywhere!"

JOHN believed that when they sat down at a snowy table in the Palm Grill and he looked at the menu. Lobsters, mushrooms, thick steaks, trout, game, champagne, quail on toast—and violin music. Fantastic food for miners—at fantastic prices.

"What next?" John asked, after they had eaten.

"We got money in our pockets. Let's go buck the tiger!"

They shouldered their way through the noisy crowd across the intersection of Crook and Main, into the Hermitage.

It was sure enough gaudy, John reflected. A sixty-foot bar, flanked by a dozen barkeeps working like fevered beavers. Opposite the bar was a line of tables for faro, blackjack, craps, roulette and stud and chuck-a-luck and wheels of fortune. And at the rear there were three rows of gambling tables. The big Cornishman led straight to a game of stud poker. John sat in with him.

Tom Alwyn gambled recklessly, as if the excitement of it were a dope he had to feed his tight-drawn nerves.

John said after a while, "You're losing your roll, Tom."

"Plenty more where it came from!"

Presently Alwyn quit and they walked to the bar.

John said, as they waited for their whiskey, "I feel kind of funny, taking ore out of the mine."

"Everybody's doing it, Jawn. What th' hell, you think four fifty a day wages will buy you decent food and enough whiskey to keep you warm in this town?"

"Have the mine operators tried stopping it?"

"Naw, but they'd squeal to high heaven if they were sufferin' too much from all the high gradin'. They're gettin' theirs. Why Hayes and Monette on the Mohawk lease took out five million dollars for themselves in one hundred days' time!" He clapped John on the back, grinning. "When in Rome, Jawn, do as the Romans do. In this camp, taking high-grade is practically a city ordinance."

"Seems to be."

"But there ain't no miner gettin' rich off it, chum, I tell you that. We eat it up, we drink it up, we gamble it away. What th' hell else is there to do in this blasted desert? We live out in the sagebrush, in tents. In summer time the heat is meltin' the gristle out of our ears, and in winter the frost is knottin' our guts all to hell. Way we figure, a man's got to have himself a time *right now.* The Lord knows, a rock fall or fire damp or hot water will kill us off soon enough, underground! Drink up, chum!"

They went the rounds—from the Northern, to the Palace, the Mohawk; and finally to the Golconda.

There John saw Mae Britton again.

She was dealing faro. On one side of her stood her lookout, collecting bets and watching the players; and on the other side was the casekeeper, keeping tabs on the cards that had been played. The brilliant light struck flame in Mae's red-gold hair. She wore a long dress of black silk that fitted snug to her shapely figure. On her right hand she wore a ring with a large amethyst that glinted and shone as her deft fingers handled a card.

SHE saw John at once, and nodded, smiling; and for an instant her cool poise eased and her blue eye swere vivid with that deep, singing warmth of feeling within her.

John looked on as she dealt a "loser" from the box, then a "winner." Both were of the same denomination.

"A 'split,' gentlemen," she said. "The house takes half."

She dealt the last 'turn' of the game, presently; said a word to the lookout, and left the table. She came to John's side, slid her arm through his and smiled up at him. His pulse skipped as they walked toward the bar and she pressed his arm against her bosom.

"You can buy me a drink, John."

They had champagne cocktails. Presently Mae Britton leaned close to him, and spoke quietly so that no one else at the crowded bar could hear.

"I was hoping you'd come in, John. I think that I've figured out why you're in Goldfield. And if my guess is right—" Her low voice broke a trifle, and her jeweled fingers pressed his arm with surprising strength. "It's no use, John. Give the whole thing up, and get out of Goldfield!"

His mouth hardened.

"I don't think I know what you're talking about."

She raised one shapely shoulder in a little shrug.

"I knew you wouldn't listen. But I had to try."

FOR ten days John worked in the McGaa lease on the Mohawk.

And then he wrote a brief letter to Loren McGaa:

"I'm ready. Get your people together at ten Monday night."

Monday night, John dressed, shaved carefully, carefully slicked back his thick sandy hair, shined his shoes and put on his expensive gray suit. Then he walked across town to the rich leaser's home and at ten o'clock he knocked on the door.

Loren McGaa admitted him. McGaa was a burly, white-haired oldtimer with a fleshy face reddened by wind and weather. He shook John's hand warmly, and led him into the big parlor. The room was thick with cigar smoke. A half-dozen of the most influential leasers of Goldfield were gathered here. McGaa introduced them to John individually—Jim Monette, and towering old Wingfield and paunchy Oddie and Nick Trumbull and Al Nixon and Sam Gaskill. As John shook hands he had the feeling that these men wanted to be friendly, but were taut and touchy, uneasy and hostile in spite of themselves.

"John," McGaa said, "I've already explained about you to these men, so you can start right in."

John nodded soberly and faced the group.

"I've been working in the McGaa lease. I've seen high-grading at first hand. I've

taken ore out in my own pockets and sold it to crooked assayers, and—"

"You've worked in just one mine?" Oddie demanded. "Hell's fire, man, you can't know how widespread it is!"

"I know that it's happening on every lease."

"You bet it is," old Wingfield grunted. "I'd say that as much gold ore is being stolen as we leasers are shipping out for ourselves!"

"Hey, that's stretching it a bit," McGaa protested.

Sam Gaskill shook his bald head.

"Huh-uh, not any. What th' hell, Loren, when miners sort out rock that runs as high as one hundred dollars a pound, one man can carry out a lot of gold. I know of one miner who got two thousand seven hundred dollars for 'jewelry rock' he took out from a single shift! Just to blow it all in for whiskey and gambling."

"Rock that rich is scarce—"

"But twenty-five-dollar-a-pound ore and even fifty-dollar rock *ain't* so scarce!" Jim Monette protested angrily.

McGaa held up a hand to quiet them; and said in a sober tone, "It is a fact that some two million dollars' worth of rich ore was taken from the Red Top and Mohawk and Jumbo mines this past year—"

"Hell, the Goldfield Consolidated mines alone lost over a million!" Monette put in.

"That's why I sent for John Marlin," McGaa said. "He can help us."

"Nobody can help us," Monette snorted.

"You figure we ought to take these losses and not do a damn thing about 'em?"

"Personally," little Al Nixon remarked, "I don't feel so bad about the high-gradin'. Those poor dumb muckers getting out the ore for us can hardly feed themselves on day wages. And the fact is, in *spite* of high-grading, we're still taking out ore amounting to as much as one hundred thirty thousand dollars a day!"

"Beside the point," McGaa snapped. "Men, John Marlin says he can stop grading."

"Like hell he can," Monette blurted.

But Oddie said, "Marlin, you stop this thieving, and by God you can name your own price!"

"I'll stop it," John said firmly. "I have a plan that I'll demonstrate first on the McGaa lease. When I've done the job, I want five thousand dollars."

"Cheap enough."

"If he can do it!"

Monette demanded truculently, "Marlin, you plan to make wholesale arrests? To lock up every damn miner taking ore?"

"Not at all. I won't arrest anybody. High-grading here is so open and widespread that it's impossible to jail every man stealing ore. Besides, you leasers have condoned it for so long that you've practically partnered in it. No one person and no dozen persons are to blame. It's the whole set-up. So I've figured out a solution that's fairest to everybody."

"All right, name it!" Monette challenged.

"I'll install a change room."

"What?"

As a shift comes out of the mine, they'll have to pass through a special room where they change out of their work clothes into other clothes. We'll have guards in there, watching—"

"It won't work!"

"I won't do it. Not on my lease!"

"—and any man who's got ore on him," John finished, "will have to drop that ore into a bin."

"God'l'mighty, you think we haven't thought of that?"

"It just won't work, Marlin!"

"It won't work," John agreed calmly, "if your guards scare easy and take bribes. But it *will* work if I install the guards and if I run it."

"I still say it won't work!" Monette yelled.

More mildly, Nixon said, "And if it would work, I wouldn't dare install it."

"Good God, no!" Gaskill breathed. "It would be cuttin' our own throats."

"What th' hell?" McGaa protested. "Give it a chance. Don't turn the idea down without even trying it!"

"Man alive!" Oddie burst out. "You don't let a rattler sting you just to see if the poison 'ud kill you! Me, I'm sayin' good night. I've heard enough!"

John's heart sank as the leasers gave him a hurried shake of the hand and left the house. They were so afraid of his plan that they could hardly talk civil with him.

"Look, John," McGaa said, "I'm backing you up. We'll install that change room and show those buzzards."

"You willing to risk the consequences?" John asked quietly.

"Son, in the underground vault on my lease I got a half-million dollars' worth of ore ready to ship. Whatever happens, I can stand it! I'll back you to the limit."

It was midnight when John left the leaser's home.

The air had a biting chill in it, but to his hot, worried face it felt good. He strode on down Main Street.

At the Golconda Saloon he turned in. Had a whiskey. Then strolled down the row of gambling tables to Mae Britton's layout.

OVER the heads of the men crowded before her game, she saw him, and gave him that quick smile which was so intimate and promising; but she did not even pause as she announced the last "turn."

"Three cards left, gentlemen. A 'loser,' a 'winner,' and a case card. You know what they are—a spade deuce, a jack of diamonds and an ace of hearts. You may make bets on the order in which they'll show, gentlemen. I will pay four to one."

There were a half-dozen bets.

On impulse, John said, "Ace, jack, and deuce."

And he bet a double eagle.

Mae pulled the first card—and it was the jack. Then came ace, and deuce. Mae's lookout gathered in the bets. It was the end of the game, and Mae nodded and moved away.

She came straight to John and took his arm.

"You see?" she whispered. "You can't win. Not in Goldfield, John!"

"I don't bank on mere luck."

She nodded. "I know. Brains count. Guts, too. But a winning combination always has got luck in it."

He looked at her. A vein was beating rapidly in his throat, *You are very lovely,* he thought. *Just looking at you makes my heart choke up in my throat.* He didn't say it aloud; he just smiled. But Mae read all that he felt in his smile, and her face warmed with color.

Soberly, however, she said, "John darling, it's known in town that you're Hugh Mason."

He caught a sharp breath, as if suddenly jolted.

"I'm ready to come out into the open," he said.

CARPENTERS worked two days setting up the change room.

Meanwhile, John selected four men to serve as guards, and armed them with short clubs. Midnight of the second day, he and his men were at the mine, and John's two pistols were belted about his lean waist.

It was the men of the second shift who were first to meet inspection. They had come into the mine, lean, these men; they were going out fat. The hoist brought the first load to the top. A high board fence, the last structure which had been built, blocked all exit except by way of the change room. Surprised, the group of miners left the cage and hurried along into the change room. There they stopped short, bewilderment flaring into anger.

For there John confronted them, and his guards stood at wary attention against the wall.

Stiff and tall, his sandy hair combed back neatly and his gray eyes hard, he stood with his coat thrown back so that his badge and holstered guns were plain to see. His voice rang out.

"Men, I am a special officer for the city of Goldfield. These guards are my assistants. We are here to see that no ore is carried off the lease. I don't intend to arrest anybody. And I don't want anybody to get hurt. You see those bins over against the wall there. You men will empty your pockets, your lunch pails, and your canvas jackets of every chunk of ore you're carrying." His voice lashed out in command: "All right, *hop to it!*"

Among the miners there was muttering and swearing. Several moved toward the bins, digging into their pockets.

But one voice lifted, reckless and hot with anger.

"The hell with 'em! Come on, they can't stop us!"

An arm swung. A jagged-edged chunk of ore whipped through the air. John did not stir as the rock whirled past his head.

His hand came up from his side and two reports of his pistol blurred together in deafening concussion in the room. And the miner who had flung the rock stood stiff with shock, wits paralyzed with realization, a red

crease along his throat and a burning blotch of blood on the rim of his ear.

"I could," John said, "have aimed an inch closer." His voice snapped out: *"Dump that ore!"*

This time they jumped to obey.

A second hoist-load of men surged into the change room.

They too stopped short; again bewilderment changed to anger as John explained, and gave orders for them to join the other men at the bins.

"Empty your pockets of high-grade. Hurry it up!"

Surprise momentarily hobbled their wits, and the example of other miners already unloading ore helped. And as the hard-eyed guards moved in on them, clubs at ready, the miners turned in an angry mass toward the bins. But John didn't relax.

Crowded together, the men's rage fed on each other's feelings. John knew what to expect; he knew what they were saying—*Damn it to hell, let's rush 'im. He's got guns, but the others haven't. Let's rush 'im, tromp 'im down and bust out.*

SO HE was ready when the bunch of them halted, milled an instant, and turned and came for him.

He shot low, carefully. He dropped the leader with a bullet in the leg, and the man next to the leader; and they dropped, the men right behind them fell over them, and the rush was slackened—and into that confusion John's guards moved, clubs swinging. A couple of miners got past, and kept on coming; but they were unarmed and when John's guns turned on them, they halted in their tracks, white-faced.

"Get back," John said. "Empty your pockets."

Sullenly the men obeyed.

When the whole shift had gone off duty, Loren McGaa came into the change room. John beckoned him to the ore bins.

McGaa's dark eyes bulged at sight of the ore.

"Lord, I had no idea they could walk out with so much!"

"Look close at the stuff."

The burly leaser picked up a chunk and turned it in his fingers. A sharp breath escaped him. He examined another fragment, and another.

"Some of this ore will run fifty dollars a pound, so help me!"

"Some more, some less," John said.

"We promised you a fee of five thousand dollars, huh? Man, you'll get that and a bonus on top of it!"

John said nothing. A tightening of his lean face betrayed his troubled thinking, but McGaa did not notice.

The real test was yet to come.

SOME of the men going off shift met, on the outside, men coming in for the next shift, and told what had happened.

So when the next shift left work, their pockets and their lunch pails and their "corset covers" were empty of rich ore.

But so were the ore cars down in the workings.

And no men of the morning shift reported for work.

Not one man.

It was what John expected. He tensed as Loren McGaa came again to the change room. The burly, white-haired leaser was grim.

"So they're not reporting for work, huh?"

"Some of them will get jobs on other leases, Mr. McGaa."

"Sure. But most of them will sulk around town, cussing us out—and getting hungry. You wait," McGaa said cheerfully. "They'll be straying back, wanting their jobs again."

"I'll wait," said John. "But will *you?*"

"I'm sticking by you to the finish!"

"Every day your men don't work costs you money."

"I can stand it. I've taken a lot out of this ground!"

John nodded, satisfied.

"Then we'll win out."

When he walked down Main Street that evening, men's faces were hard against him. He knew that they swore under their breaths as he passed. Not only the miners, but the barkeeps and gamblers, who got the money that the high-graders squandered, were hating his guts tonight.

He had a late dinner at Scanlon's Cafe, and went to his hotel. He was preparing to undress for sleep when knuckles rapped sharply on his door. Warily he opened it.

A scrawny, nervous youngster stood there.

"Mr. Marlin, sir, Mr. McGaa sent me

to say you should come quick out to the mine. He sent a rig for you, sir."

John tipped him, and grabbed his hat and coat and stuck a .45 in his waistband and hurried out. He had a strong hunch as to what was happening. A gang of the high-graders had tried to tear down the change room.

Outside the hotel, a buckboard waited, driver in the seat. And as John got in, the driver whipped his team into a start, toward the McGaa lease just outside of town.

They rattled past lighted saloons and dark homes and the rough shacks and tents of miners. The lights of the McGaa lease were close ahead.

Abruptly the team shied, pulling violently to the side of the road. Swearing, the driver reined them in.

"Some drunk, lying right out in the road!"

"Wait," John said sharply. "Maybe he's hurt. I'll see."

He grabbed the edge of the seat, to jump down—and the driver turned toward him, jammed a pistol muzzle into his side, and said, "Raise your hands, Marlin!"

For an instant John's impulse was to knock that gun aside and pull his own weapon. But in the dark rush beside the road there was a movement and a man called out harshly.

"I've got a shotgun bearing on you, Marlin!" And another voice warned, "There are five of us here!"

For a half-instant John still considered. He could still knock the driver's gun aside and put a bullet into him and leap from the buckboard. In the darkness, though these men by now had encircled the buckboard, he might still break through them. But he'd have to shoot his way out; and aside from maybe getting killed himself, he'd probably kill two-three of them. He didn't want that. It might come to that, before high-grading was licked; but not if he could help it.

"I'm raising my hands," he said quietly.

"You're smart. Get down!"

He jumped down, and the men surrounded him. The man playing possum on the roadway jumped up, too. They all wore bandanas over their faces, though in the darkness it would have been hard to recognize anyone. His gun was snatched from his belt.

"Marlin," the spokesman said, his voice heavy with leashed anger, "we're going to give you a beating. We'll work on you till you're damn near dead and what's left of you will wish you *were* dead. Maybe you'll be able to crawl away from here and maybe you won't. But if you do, keep this in mind —*Get out of Goldfield and don't come back.* Because next time we'll finish the job!"

Without warning, he was struck from behind and knocked to his knees. He tried to fight back. He lunged to his feet and flung himself at the big man who'd done the talking. But a pistol barrel struck him behind the ear and he sprawled onto the road, and heavy boots thudded mercilessly into his side. He took it. He made no outcry, but gathered his strength, lunged upright, and lashed out with his fists. It was hopeless. A blow over the eye laid him senseless in the road. For a brief while the men struck at him; but he was inert and oblivious.

When he was aware of things again, he was alone on the dark roadway. He stirred, groaning involuntarily, and started to sit up. The effort sent a wave of pain over him that made cold sweat pop out over his body. Gritting his teeth against it, he lurched to his feet, and started back toward Goldfield.

He staggered a half-dozen steps, and fell sprawling. For long minutes he lay there, his brain giddy and sharp waves of pain burning through his chest. He had two-three broken ribs, and maybe a concussion. Breathing hard, he lay there resting.

"Hey, what's wrong? You drunk?"

He hadn't heard the man approach at all. He was lifted up.

"Sa-ay, you're hurt! Lean on me. You got any friends I can take you to?"

"I got a room—Cody House," he gasped.

He tried to walk, with the man's help. But presently he passed out cold again. Dimly he knew when he was lifted into a wagon, and then carried into the hotel and put to bed. And when a doctor came and worked on him, he groggily answered a few questions. The doctor gave him something to drink that sent him into deep sleep.

He finally awoke, feeling rested, but strange. His body was stiff. Abruptly he realized that his ribs were taped up tight. And his head was bandaged. Pain knifed across his chest when he stirred but it was bearable. He looked around.

Say, this isn't my room—

The door opened. Mae Britton came in, very quietly. Then she saw that he was awake, and she smiled.

"You slept the clock around, John. How're you feeling?"

"Like I took one awful beating. Say, this isn't my room—"

"Take it easy, darling. You know, Goldfield isn't so very large, and things get around. When I heard what happened to you, I had you moved to my own place."

"You shouldn't," he said confusedly. "But it's mighty good of you—"

She leaned down, and kissed him, her lips sweet and warm upon his mouth. And straightening up, she smiled, so utterly without concern that it was bracing tonic.

"You're battered up some, but you're still a lot more man than the so-and-so's who [illegible] you. I'm a darn good nurse, John. I'll have you up and around in no time. Like some coffee?"

He nodded, and she brought him some, and held the cup to his lips. He felt better, then. He watched, in silence, as she set a table, and finally brought in roast chicken and peas and carrots and fried potatoes.

"You're thinking hard," she remarked.

"Mae, you wouldn't know who those men were who beat me up?"

She looked at him, her blue eyes very sober.

"I have friends, John. I hear things. I won't name those men for you, but I can tell you something about them."

"Who are they?" he demanded sharply.

"John, those men were *not* miners."

He stared. "But of course they were!"

"No. They were not miners. They were *leasers.*"

"Good Lord, Mae, I'm working to *help* the leasers!"

"Think a minute, John. You stopped high-grading on McGaa's lease by installing a change room. What happened? The men quit work and all gold production instantly stopped."

"But only for a while—"

"Every day," Mae said, "that a mine does not work means that much gold lost to a leaser. Lost for keeps, because there's a time limit to how long these leasers keep these mines before giving them back to their owners. Loren McGaa has already got a fat stake—as well as a lot of guts, give him credit—so he's willing to take his losses. But the other leasers absolutely are scared green for fear *their* miners might quit!"

"But I'm not putting in change rooms anywhere else—"

"Just the same, those leasers are scared. You see, they're afraid that their men will think *all* the leasers intend to put in change rooms—and they're afraid the miners will quit work on account of it. Which means no production, and no money. And since these mines are paying the leasers 'way over a hundred thousand dollars a day, in spite of high-grading, they're scared to death of their men quitting. A hundred thousand a day is a lot better than *nothing.*"

"But they'd maybe get *two* hundred thousand a day if they stuck this out!"

"But how long would they have to stick it out? A month? Some of these leases will run out in thirty days. You see?* As long as you're here to try to stop high-grading, John, the leasers will be afraid of you, and men hate what they're afraid of. They hate you worse than the high-graders themselves."

"Just the same," he said stubbornly, "I'm staying!"

She studied him a moment, then asked, low-voiced, "Would you leave, John, if I'd go with you?"

He stared at her, and he swallowed hard. But his answer came firm and unchanged.

"I've got a job to do here. I don't leave till I finish!"

HE KEPT a gun handy, but no effort was made to molest him. The leasers were evidently giving him time to get well enough to leave. He was pacing his room restlessly in two days; but he waited a couple more days before going outdoors.

Then, late in afternoon, he walked to McGaa's home.

Loren McGaa himself opened the door. And at first sight of him, John knew that something was wrong. The burly, white-haired leaser looked sick, his fleshy face white and drawn. He didn't greet John at all, just let him in and motioned to a chair,

* The original discoverer of a gold claim was often a poor prospector who lacked capital to develop his mine. Such men often leased their claim to men with money who put the prospect into production and mined it for a specified length of time, paying the original owner a percentage, twenty to thirty percent. When the term of the lease was up, the mine went back to the original discoverer.

then lit a cigar with fingers that shook. *Like he was stalling for time, as if he's ashamed of what he's going to say.* John reflected. *Damn 'im, he's backing out on me!*

Quietly John asked, "What's happened, McGaa?"

"Marlin, I'm tearing out that change room. I want my men back at work!"

"You promised to stick by me," John snapped.

"Listen." McGaa made an effort to keep his voice steady. "In an underground vault on my lease I had ten tons of picked ore. Jewelry rock, worth from ten to seventy dollars a pound! Damn near a half million dollars' worth of it!"

"So?"

"I went down to ship the stuff. I took my office crew, and unlocked the vault and—" He choked up.

"And there wasn't any ore in those bins?" John demanded.

"There was ore there, all right. Bins stacked high, damn it to hell! But not with jewelry rock. Not with seventy-dollar ore. Every damn bit of my high-grade ore was replaced by company rock. So help me! Just dollar-a-pound stuff. My half-million-dollar stake is gone!"*

John's big chest lifted to a long sigh of consternation.

Softly he said, "I'm sorry, McGaa. I'm damned sorry."

McGaa checked his runaway feelings, and spoke on.

"My lease has just twenty-nine days more to run—and I intend to take out ore every damned day of it! And many cars as my men can fill."

"So I'm fired."

"I'm sorry, John. But now I got to make some money for myself in a hurry. I want my men back to work tomorrow. So," he finished, blustering it out, "I'm ripping out the change room!"

"I can't stop you."

John's tone was mild, but his gray eyes were hard.

"But I don't want to gyp *you*, lad. In a couple days or so I'll pay you—say, two thousand—"

"No! You've agreed to pay me $5,000 to stop high-grading. I'm still going to stop it!"

John strode out stiff-backed and inwardly raging.

Walking down Main Street, he met men who knew who he was, who stared as if surprised, and who had no word of hello for him. And he realized that the leasers would hear that he was up and around. He couldn't stay in Goldfield much longer.

Back in his room again, he paced the floor, thinking hard. Walking made his taped-up ribs ache, but he was too restless and troubled to lie down. Mac had had his suitcase brought from the Cody House. He opened the case. His other .45 was inside it, and so was his double-barreled derringer. He took them out, and made sure that they were loaded.

And then Mae came home—early, looking very troubled.

"John, McGaa's miners are going back to work in the morning."

"So the news is around town already!" he said bitterly.

"What are you going to do?"

He didn't answer her, for he could not tell her what he had in mind. He turned away, saying, "See you in the morning."

She said, "Good night," and went to her room.

He waited nearly an hour, to be sure she was asleep. Then he belted on his holstered gun, and stuck the derringer in his waistband. Hat in hand, he started to leave the house.

Mae's door opened. She had dressed for bed, but wore a robe over her nightgown, and her opulent red-gold hair hung in two shining braids over her bosom.

"I couldn't sleep, John. I was afraid you'd go out."

"You'd better go back to bed."

"John, don't go out. You can't possibly accomplish anything alone. You're being so awfully reckless!"

"I've got a job to do," he said stiffly.

"Listen to me! This is the last time I'm ever going to ask you. Wait till I get dressed. There's a midnight train to Tonopah. Let's take it! We can be married in Tonopah. Will you, John?"

The light struck burnished gleam in her hair, and the linen tautened over her bosom as she caught a sharp breath.

* This happened in the Mackenzie lease on the Mohawk.

"I can't take that train, not tonight—"

"I won't ask you again!"

Her voice broke, angry and frightened. He leaned down, kissed her, hard and quick, and turned toward the door.

"If I come back," he said quietly, *"I'll ask you."*

ON Main Street, John hired a rig and driver, and gave directions. The driver took him to a dark back street of Goldfield—to the shack with the sign "Neile Husted, Assayer," painted on the window. Assayers like Husted were all located on dark back streets. Not too far from the saloons blazing with light, but not too close to legitimate business houses, either.

John tried the front door. It was locked. But a light burned in the rear. He strode around to the back of the building, shoved open the rear door and entered.

Neile Husted—lean, stooped, hard eyes peering through spectacles that slipped low onto his hawk nose—was weighing ore which an impatient, drunken miner wanted to sell.

Husted looked up, recognized John, and frowned.

John told the miner, "Get out."

"What the blasted hell— Wait, Sam," Husted blurted. *"You* get to blazes out!" he yelled at John.

John showed his badge. And quietly he said, "I'm a special officer, appointed to stop high-grading. I know your record for buying stolen ore. I'm closing you up. I could arrest you, and the men backing me could have you tried in Carson City by a federal judge, and we'd get you ten years in a penitentiary. But I'll give you a break, if you're smart enough to take it. I'll give you ten minutes to get out of town."

Husted turned red with rage. But he swallowed hard, as if making second thought rein in a reckless impulse. He said gruffly, "All right," and turned as if to set down the chunk of ore he was examining—and snatched up a .45 pistol from a shelf below the scales.

John was expecting a move like that. He struck swiftly with his fist, and knocked Husted back against the table bearing the scales—knocked him back so hard that the table crashed over, spilling scales and weights and crucibles, and Husted hit the floor in the midst of the mess. For a reeling instant pain slashed across John's taped-up ribs; but he stepped forward, and kicked the gun out of Husted's fingers, slamming it across the floor. Abruptly he pivoted as the miner swung wildly at his face. He caught the miner's arm, spun him around and gave him a shove that sent the man hurtling out the back door and slid him sprawling into the dust of the dark alley.

Husted was scrambling across the floor on hands and knees. Toward the .45 that had ricocheted back from the far wall. Bending, John seized the assayer's collar and hauled him erect. Husted tried savagely to knee him, to smash his elbow across John's throat. John drew his own Colt's pistol, and hit Husted once, across the temple, and caught him as he slumped, senseless.

John half-carried, half-dragged Husted outside to the waiting rig. And John ordered the driver, "Kelly, take him out a couple miles on the road to Tonopah and dump him. Then meet me at McCandless's place."

"Yes, sir!" said Kelly.

John found Joe McCandles alone in his assay office, three blocks farther west. McCandless was totting up figures in an account book. He was a tall, cadaverous man, gray-haired, hard of eye, thin-lipped. He looked up as John entered, and recognition brought a flash of anger to his dark face.

John strode in, put both palms down flat on McCandless's desk and leaned toward him. A dozen years ago, when John had been a peace officer in Enid, Oklahoma, just after the land rush, he had had an encounter with the crooked assayer.

John said, "You're through here, Joel. I'm closing you up. You can take what money you've got in your desk, and walk out quietly. Or you can grab the gun I'm sure you've got in that drawer. I won't lift a hand off this desk till I see your gun. But if you do grab it, I'll kill you."

"Suppose I don't do either?"

Instantly, and savagely, John brought his open hand across McCandless's face so hard that the man rocked back in his chair; and the imprint of John's hand stood livid on the crook's face as he crimsoned with fury.

"Now grab your gun," John said softly.

McCandless stood up—stood up with so violent a rush that his chair went over. But his hands were empty.

"All right," he said, breathing hard. "I've got forty thousand dollars in a San Francisco bank. I'm leaving."

"You can take your hat," John said.

AS HE hurried down the dark back street toward Ben Lash's place, it seemed to John that he was followed. He expected it, by now; just the same, a tingling walked up his spine.

Ben Lash's assay office was dark. And that was odd. These buyers of stolen ore usually kept open a good part of the night. John grinned wryly to himself. The news was getting around. Ben Lash was probably *expecting* him.

John slid his .45 from holster. He walked to Lash's front door, and kicked it so violently that it crashed open—and John flung himself to one side, as two guns streaked fire from within the assay office. And he answered that fire so swiftly that his own gun reports lapped over the others'. A man, inside the office, gasped out a strangled oath; the other man did not speak at all.

"I'm coming in," John said.

"For God's sake, don't shoot!"

John entered, sidling in to make as little target of himself as possible. He struck a match, jerking it out to one side. But no bullet came at him. Ben Lash sat on the floor, clutching at his side in agony; and the other man, whom John did not know, sat holding a bullet-shattered arm.

"You know what you could get for shooting at an officer?" John demanded.

Lash nodded mutely.

"I'll send you to Doc Helstrom's," John said. "Soon as you can travel, you get out of town. Or I'll press charges against you."

"I'll g-get out of town."

The gun reports had brought a crowd of onlookers. John answered none of the questions flung at him, merely ordered the men to help Lash and his friend to the doctor's house. John did look for some of the other town constables in the throng, but saw none. That was not reassuring.

John walked on to Mike Ryan's place.

Ryan's assay office was ablaze with lights, and the front door was open. Mike and an assistant were frantically packing equipment into boxes.

When John strode in, Ryan looked up and yelled to him.

"I'm leavin' Marlin. Give me just ten minutes more!"

John waited. And in less than ten minutes, Ryan was gone.

Not flushed with success, but taut-nerved and hot with expectancy, John strode on toward Luke McAlpin's place. John did not fool himself. He was having too good luck, and he knew it. True, these crooked ore buyers played a furtive lone-handed game; and his great advantage against them, so far, was surprise; he had been moving too fast for them. But, by now, he must expect trouble. Again he glanced back over his shoulder; again he had that strong sense of being followed.

McAlpin's assay office was lit up. Cautiously John crossed the dark street. On one side of McAlpin's building was a vacant lot; on the other side was a passageway between McAlpin's place and the next house, and the passage was pitch-dark.

McAlpin's front door stood wide open; and through it, John saw a number of men inside. He eased his .45 in holster—he had already reloaded it; and took the .41 derringer from his pocket and stuck it into his waistband. Then, briskly, he walked through McAlpin's open doorway.

McAlpin stood talking to a miner. McAlpin was a little man with a big head that seemed even bigger because of a thick shock of iron-gray hair and heavy spectacles that magnified his bulging eyes. John's swift glance moved over the other men. The miner's coat bulged over the butt of a gun stuck into his belt. And the two other men inside, who sat against the wall and smoked as they talked were men whom John recognized with a start—Tip O'Hennessey and Al Braddock, both town constables. Warning shouted through John's brain. The constables were here for a reason.

Luke McAlpin spoke first, his voice surprisingly deep and booming for a little man.

"We been expecting you, Marlin."

"Then you know why I'm here," he said curtly.

The two policemen had risen from their chairs.

"Look, Marlin," O'Hennessey said, "we know McAlpin. He doesn't buy any high-grade, and we—"

"You're a damned liar," John said quietly. "He does buy high-grade, and like most of

the crooked buyers, he pays you to leave him alone."

"You saying that we take bribes?" Braddock demanded.

This was their plan, he realized: to start a fight, to say that he had crowded them into shooting and they had had to kill him in self-defense. The back door was open to the dark alley. The windows on this side, and on the side opposite him, too, were open. He'd have to figure on that!

He said, "You two are suppposed to be cops. You know that McAlpin buys stolen ore. If you aren't taking money from him, why don't you close him up?"

Braddock was crimsoning with rage. He was already steamed up for what he had to do. He advanced on John, swearing.

"Blast your soul to hell, I don't let nobody call me crooked!"

"Don't move," John commanded.

Luke McAlpin was quick and shrewd.

"Marlin, we ain't foolin' you none, I see that," he said. "But we do mean business. You can do one of two things. You can hand over your guns and say you'll take the next train out, and we'll let you walk out of here. Otherwise—"

"Start it," John cut in sharply.

McAlpin flushed, and swallowed hard.

"Now, look. It don't hurt to be sensible—"

"I'm ready," John interrupted again.

McAlpin's gaze wavered; for an instant he looked at the two constables and nervously licked his lips. And the miner standing beside McAlpin shifted his weight, and his right hand inched down, fingers spreading a trifle. *Another instant,* John realized, *McAlpin will give a sign, and they'll all start their gunplay together.*

"So you're bluffing," John said, with contempt.

McAlpin shrugged, lips pouting wryly, and raised his left hand and scratched his head.

Instantly John sprang sideways, bringing his back to the wall, his hands coming up from his belt so swiftly it was as if he had wished his guns leveled into his fists. Swiftly he moved, so swiftly that the shotgun blast which came through the open window across from him buried its buckshot into the wall where he had been standing an instant before.

Almost blending into the roar of the 12-gauge, his .45 whipped a bullet at the flash outside the window; and he fired instantly again as McAlpin raised a pistol from under the counter before him. McAlpin sprawled across the counter, shot through the heart. But already the other men were bringing their weapons up, already the miner was shooting.

And John staggered back against the wall from the smash of a bullet into his shoulder. But before the miner could press trigger again, John knocked him spinning against the counter with a bullet in his side. And then Braddock's bullet tore through John's left arm, the impact twisting him around so that O'Hennessey's slug went wide and just creased his throat. The derringer dropped from John's left hand, but the .45 was steady in his right; and he shot Braddock through the head, killing him instantly, and John's next shot caught O'Hennessey squarely in the throat.

O'Hennessey fell shooting; even as he pitched forward, his gun spoke, and John lurched back against the wall, the bullet low in the right side of his chest. He kept his gun leveled, to shoot again; but it wasn't necessary. O'Hennessey sprawled face-down upon the floor.

JOHN'S arm dropped, then a sickening nausea of weakness hit him. He leaned back against the wall, the room blurring to his sight. Dimly he saw a man step into the open doorway, a sawed-off shotgun in his arms. The bushwhacker who'd fired through the open window! Dimly John saw him, and John tried to raise his right arm, tried to bring his blurring vision to focus, tried to shoot; but he could not, and he tensed against the blast that must come—

A gun spoke twice, a small caliber gun. The shotgun roared then, but its charge flew wild into the ceiling as the man spun, and collapsed to the floor, and lay moaning.

John stood taut, fighting the blackness that edged in on his senses. He saw Mae Britton come in the door. He looked at her as she came straight toward him, her face white with alarm.

"John, you're hurt. Lean on me. We'll go to Doc—"

"That man with the 12-gauge," he said thickly. "You shot him?"

She nodded, and showed him the derringer in her handbag.

"Come, John. We'll get a carriage, and—"

"No. One more place. Just down the street." Cold sweat beaded his face. "Just one more place, then I'm through."

"John, you're losing blood, you'll fall in the road—"

"Not till I've seen Landiss."

He made it out the door all right, but in the street he stumbled, and would have fallen if she had not steadied him.

Bill Landiss's assay office was half a block away. Reaching, John pushed Mae away. He walked into the office, lurching in his stride. His side and shoulder were stained with seeping blood, and his face was haggard with pain.

Bill Landiss was busy packing. He looked up, he saw John, and the gun in John's hand. Landiss went livid with fear.

"I'm c-closing up," he gasped. "I'm leaving right now—"

"Get going."

Landiss whirled and fled out the back door.

Not until then did John ease up. He turned, as Mae came in; he started to smile, to say, "Well, I did it—" But the room went black before his eyes and he slumped to the floor, passing out cold.

When he came to, he was on the back seat of Kelly's rig, and Mae was holding him against her, and she was crying.

"Hush," he said softly. "I'm all right."

"Sure, sure, John. Rest easy. We'll be home in a minute."

"So you're taking me home," he murmured. "But I didn't break the bank, playing faro."

"No, darn you, you didn't break the bank," she said. "But if you got yourself killed, you'd sure break my heart. Kelly," she ordered, "drive faster, will you!"

JOHN mended fast, and was able to sit up in bed when Loren McGaa came to Mae's house, one morning, to see him.

"John, high-grading has been dwindling out until it's just about stopped altogether," he announced.

"Of course, McGaa," John said. "With the crooked assayers run out of town, there's no market for stolen ore."

"You did a good job, son."

"I stopped high-grading. But *keeping* it stopped, McGaa, is a headache that belongs strictly to you leasers. Crooked ore buyers will come coyoting around Goldfield. Don't think they won't."

"John, how'd you like to be county sheriff?"

"No, sir! I'm leaving your problem right in your lap."

McGaa sighed, but grinned at him.

"And I'll leave this bonus right in *your* lap. You've earned it twice over, son."

"Mae!" John yelled, when McGaa had gone.

She hurried into his room, her lovely face startled.

"What's wrong, John?"

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's right! Look at this." He held out the check for her to see. "What does it say?"

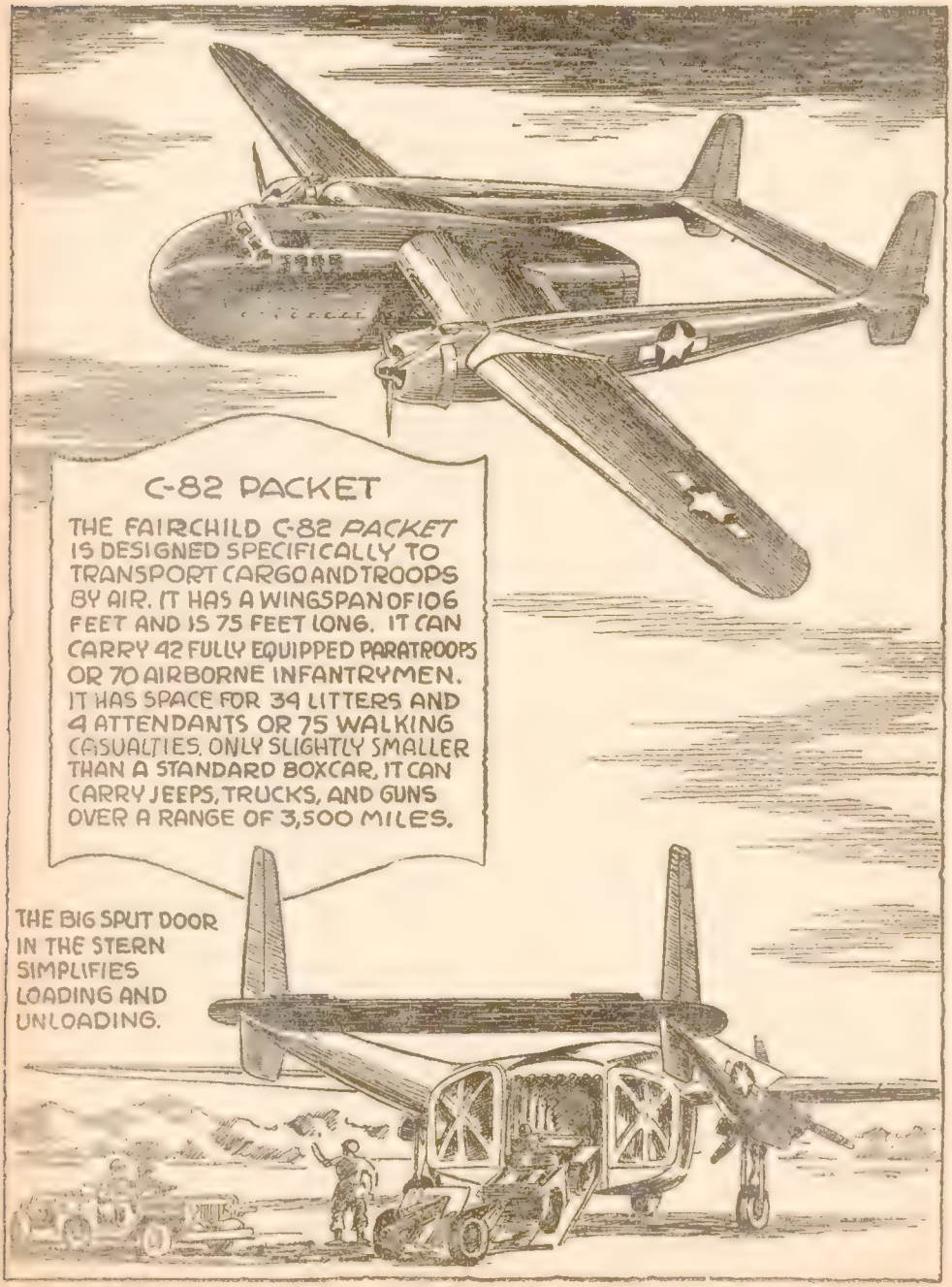
"Five thousand dollars. Oh, that's fine, darling!"

"Is that *all* you can read on it? Now, me," he said, abruptly serious, "I read on it two railway tickets to California, and a stake to help me start a freight line, and— What do you say, Mae? Will you go with me? I'm asking *you*, now!"

Her answer was to lean toward him, to kiss him with a warmth that left him shaken.

Wings for Victory

BY Jim Kelly



C-82 PACKET

THE FAIRCHILD C-82 *PACKET* IS DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY TO TRANSPORT CARGO AND TROOPS BY AIR. IT HAS A WINGSPAN OF 106 FEET AND IS 75 FEET LONG. IT CAN CARRY 42 FULLY EQUIPPED PARATROOPS OR 70 AIRBORNE INFANTRYMEN. IT HAS SPACE FOR 34 LITTERS AND 4 ATTENDANTS OR 75 WALKING CASUALTIES. ONLY SLIGHTLY SMALLER THAN A STANDARD BOXCAR, IT CAN CARRY JEEPS, TRUCKS, AND GUNS OVER A RANGE OF 3,500 MILES.

THE BIG SPLIT DOOR IN THE STERN SIMPLIFIES LOADING AND UNLOADING.

A Certain Traveler Was Vaguely Uneasy About Those Twenty $1,000 Bills in His Left Hand Trousers Pocket

FORTY ACRES AND A CORPSE

By KEN LEWIS

WHEN J. A. "Bunts" Maguire glimpsed himself in the station window just as he stepped from the Missouri Pacific local at Augustville, he knew for certain that all was not well with him. The sweatband of his 98-cent imitation Panama dribbled moisture, and his gray $25 suit looked as though it had been slept in.

These facts in themselves could hardly be called unusual. The suit *had* been slept in, most of the way from Omaha—and when a fat man sleeps in a day coach his clothes usually show it. Also, the July heat was enough to wilt the sweatband of many a more pretentious chapeau. But there were other indications that Mr. Maguire was not quite himself that afternoon.

There were, for instance, the unaccustomed crowsfeet pinching the corners of his sharp little eyes, and the total lack of any smile playing about usually bland and invariably florid features.

He was, he realized, still vaguely uneasy about those twenty $1,000 bills in his left trousers pocket.

A cool twenty grand, he mused; then stopped, frowning slightly, to amend the

thought. Perhaps the money wasn't so cool. He knew nothing whatever of its original source, but it was certainly unusual for a casual client to trust him with that much *good* dough. Not that his reputation wasn't the best in the country in his line. Only the line wasn't exactly the kind to inspire $20,000 worth of confidence from a virtual stranger. . . .

Ah well, he sighed, looking about him. Aside from the station master peering curiously from the door of the small red waiting room, and a tall, wind-browned young man parked in a Model A sedan at the edge of the dusty platform, the tiny station was deserted.

To its left stood the handful of squat frame buildings which were "Augustville, El. 1,562, Pop. 393." To its right thousands of acres of ripening wheat stretched like a wrinkled gold scarf beneath the cloudless afternoon sky. Here and there the burnished scarf had been moth-eaten by combines, and on the farthest ridge a plume of chaff moved slowly with the wind, like a freighter hull down over the horizon.

His smile returned. *What if the money should be a trifle warm,* he reflected. *The citizens of Augustville wouldn't know the difference.* By the time the tall young man in the Model A had finished his scrutiny and turned to twist the key in the ignition, Bunts' rotund countenance wore the satisfied look of a rosy plum which had just succeeded in escaping from somebody's shopping bag. He raised a pudgy arm.

"One moment, my boy."

The young man took his hand from the dashboard and looked up. He had a pleasant, sensitive face and brown eyes which, Bunts sensed, now held an unaccustomed gravity.

"Yes?"

Bunts smiled benignly. "I am an Omaha —um—businessman who has come to aid with the wheat harvest," he announced. "I read about the critical labor shortage in this county, and having nothing of importance on my schedule for the next week or so, I decided to volunteer my services."

The young man stared at him sharply. A small gold button in his pressed but slightly shiny black lapel indicated his recent discharge from the Army.

"You mean to say you came all the way out here to slave in these hot dusty wheatfields—just to be patriotic?"

Bunts was shocked. "And why not?" he wanted to know. "What true, right-thinking American could do less? I was raised on a wheat farm, my boy. Perhaps you could direct me to the current—um—scene of operations."

The young man shrugged. "Not much harvesting going on around here today," he said morosely. "Everybody's knocked off for Mike Herold's funeral."

Bunts digested this. He sighed and removed the imitation Panama to swab the bald, gray-fringed dome of his scalp with a napkin-size handkerchief. With the hat off, his merry black eyes and portly paunch made him look much like an Episcopal bishop enjoying a holidy.

"Um—the local hostelry, perhaps?" he suggested.

His companion shook his head. "Hotel's been closed since they rerouted the highway two years ago." He looked up with sudden decision, extending a firm brown hand. "I'm Bill Baker," he said. "Reckon you can bunk with me, if you're on the level about wanting to help. Cissy won't mind."

BUNTS gripped the hand warmly. J. A. Maguire, Sir," he said. "You are a true patriot!" He waddled around and heaved himself into the seat, tossing his fraying straw suitcase into the back.

"Herold," he mused, as Bill Baker started the car. "Mike Herold. The farmer killed by a hit-run driver near here last week? I read about it in the Omaha papers. Mr. Herold must have been quite a local personage, if the harvest stops for his funeral."

Baker nodded glumly. "Best-liked man in this part of the county," he said gruffly. "Hardly a family he hadn't helped some way or another during the past twenty years. I was his foreman—before he was murdered."

Murdered? Bunts' mind clouded with vague misgivings. In thirty years of selling various expensive—and often quite mythical —commodities, he had always steered carefully clear of violence in any form. And especially murder! He began to think less of this job, despite the fat commission in prospect.

Then his sharp little eyes brightened. "Um," he said. "I see. Yes, I believe a hit-

run fatality is sometimes classed as negligent homicide."

His driver snorted. "I'm talking about murder in the first degree!" he said savagely. "Wilful and premeditated—with malice aforethought!" He broke off as Bunts swallowed dryly.

"Don't know why I'm telling you this," Bill Baker admitted, "except that I've got to talk about it with somebody besides Cissy. And being an outsider, maybe you'll think of some angle I've missed."

Bunts nodded weakly. If there was one thing he did not want to hear about, it was murder in Augustville. Nevertheless, it might be well to know all the local gossip, before he set up his pitch.

"I believe I am rather good at—uh—angles," he said modestly. "If you feel the urge to unburden yourself to me, my boy, go right ahead."

The facts, as outlined by young Bill Baker, were briefly these: During the depression Mike Herold had mortgaged his 160-acre wheat farm at the town's edge to Josephus Anderby, president of the Augustville Farmer's Bank, for $10,000.

A number of routine extensions followed, and then oil was discovered in the next township and Anderby had hired a geologist to come out from Kansas City and look over the Herold property. Herold talked with the geologist and realized that the mortgage probably wouldn't be extended again. So he'd done his harvesting early, marketed his wheat, and taken his payment in cash.

The night of his death he had left the house with the money, telling his daughter he was going to walk into town and pay off the mortgage. It was only about a half-mile from the farm to the home of Anderby, who lived alone, and Herold knew the banker kept the mortgage in a wall safe because it was personal rather than bank business.

WHEN the old farmer was found dead at the roadside several hours later, the money was missing. Anderby claimed he hadn't seen Herold that night, and showed the mortgage to prove it. A new cashier at the milling company office had carelessly failed to keep a list of the serial numbers of the bills paid Herold that afternoon, so there was no hope of a lead there.

"The money was incidental, anyway," Baker concluded bitterly. "With oil on the place, it was the mortgage that counted. If you want the truth, I think Mike paid off that mortgage just like he planned. Then Anderby followed him in his car, ran him down, and stole the mortgage back. With the wheat money gone, he knew Cissy'd never be able to pay up before he forecloses next week."

Bunts thought about that. Cissy, he gathered, was Harold's daughter and sole surviving heir. He also gathered that there was something more than an employee-employer relationship between Cissy and the young man beside him. He pulled his thoughts back to what he had read of the case in the papers.

"But how about the hubcap the sheriff found in the ditch near Herold's body?" he wanted to know. "And how about the statement of that filling station attendant in Superior, that a short dark stranger driving an out-of-state car with one hubcap missing stopped there for gas an hour or so after the death?"

Baker snorted. "Hogwash! Anderby planted that old hubcap to mix things up. He's got all kinds of junk in his barn. And that short dark stranger gag was either a coincidence or a pipedream the filling station kid was paid to bring up, later. You'd be surprised how much evidence you can buy with all the dough old Josephus Anderby's got."

Bunts sighed profoundly. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I think I should very much like to meet this rural tycoon of finance. What time did you say the funeral starts? I supposed everyone of consequence will be present."

Baker scowled at his watch. "Just time to make it," he said. "Got to pick up Cissy first. She had me meet the train because she thought some of Mike's relatives from Phillipsburg might be up. But I guess they couldn't get away. Yes, Anderby'll be there, all right."

Cissy Herold was all the daughter of the community's best-loved character should be. A demure but determined figure in black, with long dark curls knotted at the back of her head, she moved gracefully down the steps from the large white farmhouse with Bill Baker hovering at her elbow.

Despite the fact that her dark blue eyes

were red-rimmed and swollen from recent tears, they lighted warmly as her companion introduced Bunts and explained his mission to Augustville.

"I think that's splendid of you," Mr. Maguire," she said softly. "We farmers can certainly use all the help we can get right now. I'm so glad you'll be staying with us."

Bunts looked at her carefuly. He saw that she genuinely meant it.

"Beauty, intelligence and character," he murmured later, after they'd reached the church and Cissy had gone into the little side alcove reserved for relatives. "A remarkable combination!"

Mr. Baker seemed to agree.

JOSEPHUS ANDERBY was also all that could be expected from his impromptu host's description, Bunts realized philosophically when the old banker was pointed out to him, in one of the pews of the small square auditorium. Gaunt, stooped and graying, Anderby wore his steel-gray eyes like a mask in his bony face, and the cut of his long hooked nose was definitely vulpine.

Perhaps it was mere coincidence which later found Bunts standing beside the banker on the far outskirts of the crowd gathered for the final brief ceremony in the little cemetery beside the church. And perhaps it was the contagion of grief which required the ministrations of Bunts' large pocket handkerchief.

Anyway, just as the minister began his closing prayer, out came the handkerchief. And with it came twenty loosely-folded $1,000 bills, to buffet Anderby's skinny knee as they tumbled to the greensward.

Bunts looked down absently, carefully shifting his bulk to screen the pile of currency from the eyes of anyone else in the crowd who might be irreverent enough to glance over his shoulder at the moment.

"Oh, yes," he whispered. "Stupid of me. I'd forgotten all about that. Just help me retrieve it, will you, friend?"

Banker Anderby was hard pressed, trying to stare at Bunts and the bills at the same time. His flinty eyes burned brightly, and his large Adam's apple quivered delicately, like a yo-yo caught at the end of its string.

Then he dropped a shoulder and began to help Bunts collect the recalcitrant twenty grand. His long bony fingers caressed the lettuce tenderly, and there was a definite air of respect in the way he handed the money back after a quick, thorough scrutiny.

"Awfully kind of you, Old Chap," Bunts murmured as the prayer ended. He waddled hastily to the waiting Ford before Old Chap could recover his powers of speech.

DINNER at the Herold farm that night brought back memories. Very pleasant memories of a very long time ago. Bunts hadn't been kidding when he told Bill Baker he was raised on a wheat farm.

First came applejack, rich with the heady essence of the orchard. Then thick succulent slices of roast beef garnished with mashed potatoes and brown gravy; and hot cornbread and honey, topped off with cherry pie. Great thick hunks of pie bursting with red full-bodied fruit which swam in its own sweet syrup.

"Any girl who can make pie like this certainly ought to be married," Bunts announced, glowing mellowly with the brandy. "What's the matter with you two?" He glared darkly at Bill.

Cissy's mouth dropped open and Bill blushed. "I didn't ask her in time," he said ruefully. "How could I, when her father was alive and the farm was safe? What did a hired hand like me have to offer? Then, when I finally got around to it the other day, she said, No. Thinks my sympathy got the best of me, I guess."

Bunts nodded owlishly. "Think I'll just ramble down into town," he said, sponging his chin with a napkin. "Got a wire to send. I suppose there's a telegrapher at the station."

The telegram was addressed to Alfonse Varda, Petrol, Inc., Kansas City, Mo. It said simply: "The seed has been planted. We may expect the harvest soon."

TIME had brought many changes since Bunts' last visited a wheat field ripe for harvest. This he reluctantly discovered at 5:58 a.m. the next day, when he and Bill arrived at the adjoining farm where the neighborhood crew was already in action.

Introduction of combines had eliminated the separate steps of cutting the grain and binding it into bundles, stacking these to

ripen, then pitching them onto hay racks and off again later onto the conveyor belt of an old-style separator. Gone, too, he sadly discovered, were the noon-time threshers' feasts of the pre-rationing era. These days the men all brought their own lunches and ate them in the shade of the combine.

All, that is, except Banker Josephus Anderby. He ate his alone in the tonneau of the chrome and white sidewall Packard parked in the barnyard. The presence of this crotchety volunteer had inspired almost as much comment among the crew as the arrival of Bunts himself.

"Wonder what made that old devil show up and offer to help?" Bill Baker said in Bunts' ear. "That's the first human thing he's ever done."

"Perhaps my own modest example has shamed his latent patriotism," Bunts said piously. "He looks lonely, sitting there all by himself. Surely the neighborly thing would be to join him."

Banker Anderby had recovered his vocal powers overnight. And Bill Baker was obviously amazed to discover that the old man could be quite cordial on occasion. Bunts accepted his proffered handful of bony fingers.

"Splendid thing you're doing here, Mr. Maguire," Anderby croaked. "Splendid! So fine I'd hate to see you lose anything because of it."

Bunts swallowed the remnants of a roast beef sandwich. "Lose anything?" he echoed. "But what could I possibly—"

"All that cash you're carrying around," said Anderby solemnly. "That money would be a lot safer in my bank."

Bunts stopped wiping cherry pie juice from a fat lower lip to throw up his hands in horror. "Oh no, my dear fellow!" he protested. "Nothing personal, of course—but I don't trust banks! Not after one stole all the profits of my first invention, back in 1931! Naturally, I carry the proceeds of my second invention with me, when I travel."

He paused. "No," he said softly. "No, if I were to part with my little nest egg at all, it would be for some good sound investment. Say a wheat farm—with advantages."

"Advantages?"

Bunts nodded. He noticed Bill Baker staring at him quizzically. "Oh," he said diffidently. "I suppose a little oil on the place wouldn't hurt anything."

Anderby mulled this over while he munched. "You know," he said presently, "I dabble a little in real estate myself. If you're really interested in an investment like that, I may have just what you're looking for. I'll be at home this evening, if you'd care to go further into the matter."

Bunts considered this judiciously. "You are most kind, sir," he said at last. "I just might drop around for a half an hour or so this evening—if you're sure I won't be intruding—"

BUNTS found the musty bottle of port Anderby dug out of his basement quite exhilarating. Exhilarating, too, was the legal looking document the banker dug out of his living room wall safe some time later.

"You'll notice," said Anderby, "that the mortgage is for only $10,000. However, since the presence of oil on the property has been verified, I, of course, attach a considerably higher value to it."

"Of course," Bunts murmured, eyes narrowing. It wouldn't do to be too greedy, he decided. A two grand commission should be ample. "How would $18,000, cash, strike you?"

Anderby appeared to consider this, bony knuckles, drumming absently on the table top.

At last he nodded. "Why, yes," he said. "I think that would be all right."

Somewhat to his surprise, Bunts found that the necessary papers had already been prepared. He was reaching for his pen when the loud pounding echoed through the house from the front door.

Visibly irritated, Anderby himself answered the knock. And Cissy Herold burst breathlessly into the room from the corridor outside.

"Mr. Maguire!" she panted. "Don't sign anything! Bill had an idea you were about to buy the mortgage on our place because you thought there was oil on it. But there isn't! I found this in one of Dad's dresser drawers when I was going through some of his things tonight. It's been opened—must've come the day he was killed!"

Bunts was non-plussed. "But— but what is it, my dear?"

Cissy caught her breath. "A carbon copy of the final report from that geologist Mr. Anderby had looking over our property," she gasped. "Daddy told me he'd arranged to have the geologist send us a carbon when he mailed his report to Mr. Anderby. As you see, it says his first impression was wrong. Thorough examination failed to show any oil anywhere in the vicinity!"

Bunts examined the onionskin pages carefully. He noted the date—more than a week before—and the signature at the bottom. Then he noticed something else. His ruddy complexion turned a sickly green and flash bulbs began to explode inside his skull.

"Great leaping balls of fire!" he gurgled indistinctly. "Of course! Why didn't somebody tell me—"

"Mr. Maguire! What's wrong? Have you already bought the mortgage?"

Bunts shook his head and put a trembling finger beside a row of large numbers in the margin of the report. "These," he said, "are penciled, not carboned. Your father's handwriting, my dear?"

Cissy bent to scan the figures. "Why— why yes! What do they mean, Mr. Maguire?"

He sighed. "Undoubtedly," he said, "these are the serial numbers of the bills taken from him after his death. The milling company didn't keep a list, but he did. He probably jotted them down on the first piece of paper that came to his hand. We must notify the sheriff of them at once."

He broke off to glower at Anderby's sunken, sullen face. "So," he said frigidly, "you knew all the time that land didn't have oil on it. You deliberately tried to swindle me!"

Anderby tried to bluff it through. "I do not consider that report conclusive!" he blustered. "I still think the man's first impression was correct—that there is oil on that property!"

Bunts bridled. "This report is conclusive enough for me," he said. "I shall put my money to better use. Miss Herold, please accept enough of it to pay off this damnable mortgage right now and gain full possession of your farm."

Cissy gasped in startled wonder. Then she shook her head and began to cry. "Oh, no, Mr. Maguire. It—it's awfully kind of you, b-but I couldn't do that! I'd never be able to pay you back—for ages!"

Bunts eyed her severely. "Don't be selfish, my dear," he said sharply. "I'm not doing this for you alone. There's young Mr. Baker to consider, too. I insist that you accept the loan as a wedding present."

Cissy's eyes were suddenly filled with stars. She dabbed at them with a handkerchief. It was Anderby's turn to stare, non-plussed.

Bunts sighed and took the wad of bills from his pocket. He began to pay them off, one at time, across the table. A careful observer might have noticed that he did not take them in order from the top of the pile. But neither Cissy or Anderby were in any condition to notice the care with which he separated the ten that went back in his pocket from the ten that finally lay in a little heap on top of the mortgage.

BACK at the Herold farmhouse that night, Bunts went to his room and penned a rather lengthy epistle to Detective Lieutenant Marple, in charge of the Kansas City Police Department's bunco squad. In the course of many investigations and a few arrests, there had grown up between himself and the estimable lieutenant one of those strangely taciturn friendships which sometimes arise between the hunter and the hunted. Abe Marple knew that Bunts Maguire's word was as good as his bond—to anybody but a sucker.

To this letter he affixed the necessary first-class postage.

A second envelope he addressed to Alfonse Varda, Petrol, Inc. This envelope, when full, was bulky and inclined to rustle when shaken. Nevertheless, he plainly marked it Special Delivery Air Mail and borrowed the required stamps from his sparkling hostess.

Waddling along the half-mile of deserted roadway to the Augustville post office five minutes later, he realized wryly that when he dropped those envelopes into the chute he would be deliberately slamming the door on all that life had meant to him for the past thirty years. No one who has spent more that a quarter of a century quietly skirting the fringes of the law, can afford to turn one of his fellow travelers in to the

police without expecting almost prohibitive personal repercussions if he returns to his own accustomed paths.

Nevertheless, murder was one thing he meant to have no part in, even as an unwitting dupe. And then, there was Cissy—and Bill. He sighed, filling his lungs with the warm night air, while he regarded the dreaming serenity of the cloudless, star-filled sky.

A place like Augustville, he mused, could certainly do things to you. Especially if you'd come from such a place yourself, once.

THEY were gathered in the Herold living room four days later—Bunts, Bill, Cissy, and gangling, black-mustached Sheriff Ely Watts, who'd driven up from Superior.

"Yessir," Sheriff Watts was saying, "it was that danged geologist Anderby brought out here from Kansas City. Somebody tipped off the K. C. cops that you dad's money was in his safe so they got a John Doe warrant and ransacked his office. And yessir, there she was!"

"But didn't he have any explanation to offer?" Bill Baker wanted to know.

Sheriff Watts guffawed loudly. "Oh, sure!" he chortled. "Claimed somebody mailed him th' money the day before, and he'd burnt the envelope. You should've heard them K. C. cops laugh! Specially after the lab men proved that hubcap we found in the ditch come off his car, and that filling station kid over to Superior identified this Varda as the guy who stopped for gas there the night of the murder."

"But who the devil tipped off the K. C. cops?" Baker was still obviously reluctant to abandon his theory about Anderby.

Bunts paled a little. "Um—I believe I did," he said quietly.

"You!"

Bunts nodded gravely. "I thought it was Anderby, too, son," he said, "until I saw the date on that report Cissy found in her father's effects. Then I knew Anderby wouldn't have killed him to keep him from paying off the mortgage. He already knew—or thought he did—that the land had no oil on it.

"No, it had to be the geologist. The scheme is rather common among scoundrels of his ilk, I believe. The geologist is called in by a land or mortgage owner to examine property for oil possibilities. He finds them, all right. Plenty of them.

"However, he reports no indication of oil anywhere around. Once the owner or mortgage holder is convinced of this, the geologist is later able to send around an agent to front for him, and thus buy up the land at a fraction of its real value. That was undoubtedly Alfonse Varda's plan.

"But, when Herold confided to him that he was going to sell his wheat early and pay off the mortgage at once, Varda saw the scheme going amiss. He knew Herold loved this farm too much to sell it—oil or no oil. So he found it necessary to—uh—eliminate him and steal the money. I imagine he was lurking along the road in his car that night, waiting for Herold to come along with the cash in his pocket."

He broke off, blanching as he thought again of the trap he'd almost walked into. He'd thought at first that Varda was willing to trust him with the twenty grand because of his reputation as an ace confidence man who never welched on a business agreement. But now he knew the real reason. Ten of those bills had been taken from Mike Herold's body.

If the serial numbers weren't known, as the newspapers said, then everything would be all right. But if the police had been holding out, did know the numbers, then it would have been Bunts who got caught with the goods, blamed for the kill.

There'd be no way he could prove a connection with Varda. Because there'd never been any connection, really. He'd never seen the oily little geologist until the day of the train trip, when the man had got in touch with him, given him the money, and asked him to act as agent in a small oil deal upstate.

SHERIFF WATTS was peering at him shrewdly, inscrutably fondling the black mustache. "So you think this Varda had a stooge workin' with him, huh?" he mused. "Wonder what the stooge had to do with the murder?"

Bunts sucked in his breath. "Nothing," he said quietly. "Absolutely nothing. He might guess that because Varda wasn't willing to try to buy the property outright, he was up to something a little shady. But you can bet that if he knew anything at all about

a murder being involved, he'd never have accepted his part of the assignment at all. That kind don't mess with dynamite that way."

Sheriff Watts narrowed his eyes. He fondled the mustache some more. At last he nodded. "Mebbe so," he said oddly. "I guess there wouldn't really be nothin' we could hold the stooge for, even if we did find him. Bill told me about you buyin' the mortgage back for Cissy here, Maguire. That makes you rate pretty high in my book." He donned his pearl gray fedora and started for the door.

Bunts stepped forward uncertainly. "Um —Sheriff," he called, "I wonder if I could trouble you for a ride to the depot? I'm afraid I've imposed on these young people quite long enough."

Cissy's face fell. "Oh, Mr. Maguire," she cried, "do you really have to go? You seemed to enjoy yourself so much here, and —well—we do need another man around the place so badly. But I suppose that's selfish of us, when you have your business interests to look after and everything—"

Bunts peered carefully into the dark blue eyes.

He was again reminded that Cissy Herold seldom said things unless she meant them. He sighed.

"To tell you the truth, my dear," he said softly. "I was thinking of taking a little vacation from business, anyway."

THE HOUSE THAT VANISHED

There was one man who was supposed to know every secret connected with the White Sands

A novelette by . . . **Andrew H. Hepburn**

SUSPENDED SENTENCE

Black John Smith sort of wondered if some of those old Gravel Hounds down in Dawson could be mistaken about his kindheartedness.

by James B. Hendryx

THE DOG COLLAR MURDER

It was in the Cajun Country, and the chief of police wished folks would go somewhere else to get themselves murdered. He didn't want to worry about dog collars and city crooks

by Neil Martin

THE WRONG JAW

The third Engineer resented his fellow officers thinking an attempt on his life was just a nice break in the monotony of convoy life.

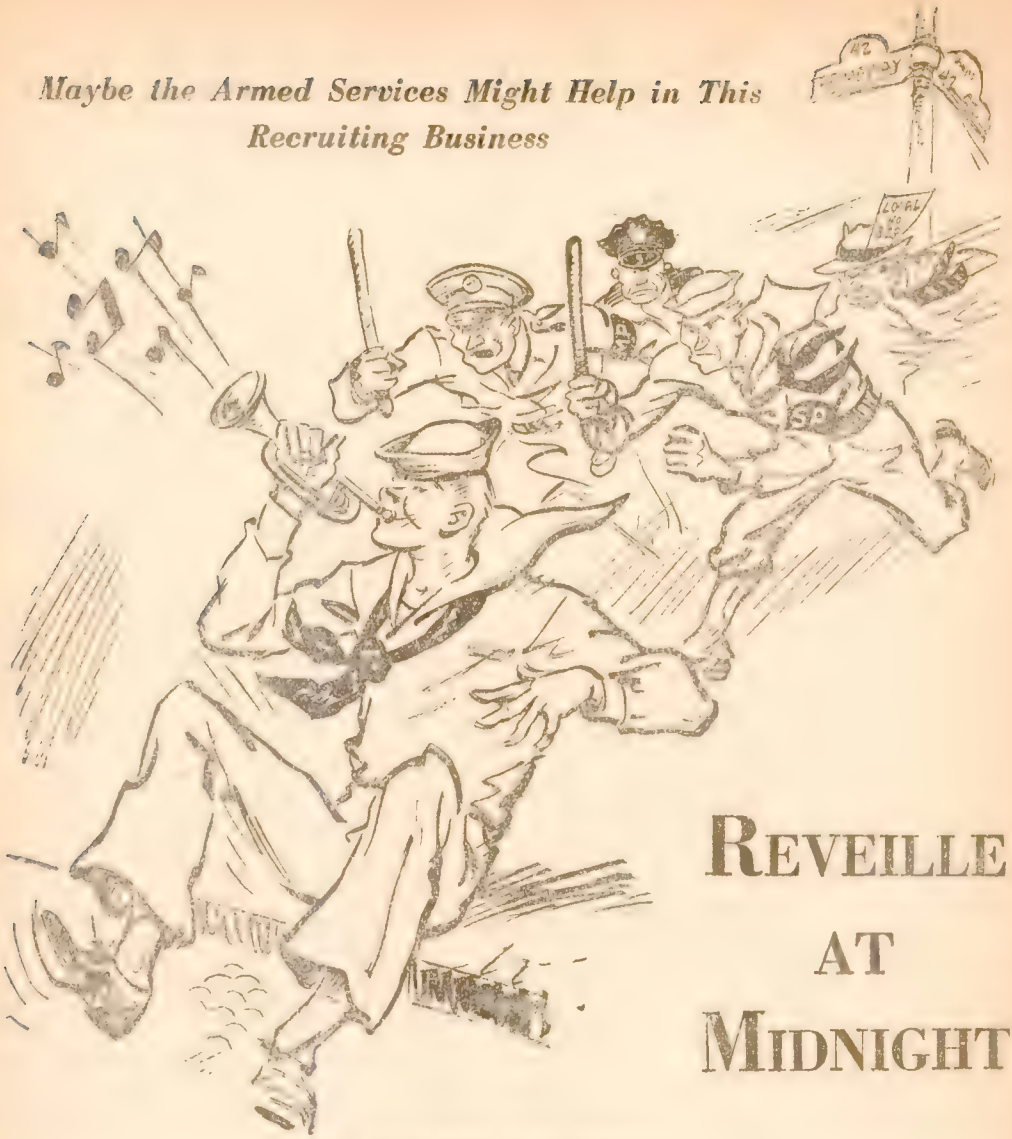
by Richard Howells Watkins

And a story of Panhandle Pete and the black market in cigarettes

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

All in our next issue—Short Stories—April 25th

Maybe the Armed Services Might Help in This Recruiting Business



REVEILLE AT MIDNIGHT

By GORDON BELL

A PARASITE is an animal that fastens onto something good: a hot dish, a very superior animal and a beautiful parasite. Or like Dolores Hutchins, who is Red Jaines, who did some big time fastening until the hook got him. Me? Outside of being something good, I'm just plain Micky Flynn, Bugler 1/c, U. S. N. R., a sailor who can play all the calls in the book and lead a sizzling jive with his left hand.

Have you ever been a bugler? Not at church picnics, or the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or even at Saratoga for the third race; but a professional in dungarees who blows Reveille and Mess Gear and Watertight Doors and Attention and Retreat and Taps while his ship is slopping through more water than ought to be allowed to accumulate in one place.

At twelve, I carried my first trumpet in a violin case that was slightly cracked from having been wrapped around the neck of

the first guy who tried to stick up Pop's music store. I was an infant in those days but, boy, I wasn't bad. No, sir. Strictly classic, that was me. I'll bet I was the youngest kid in America to have his lip caught in the mouthpiece trying to stutter through "Carnival of Venice."

When the Japs tried to take a fall out of us, I went to Pa and said, "Pa, I want to fight! And Pa said, "Yes, Son, I know;" and Ma said, "Oh, not at 17! My baby!" and Gladys said, "Pooh! Imagine a German or a Jap being scared of my kid brother!" Then I went around to Charlie Sewell, who's an old man in his forties and has been playing second sax in Micky Flynn's Ramblers but who was working for the local draft board so he could eat regular. "Charlie," I says, "cross me off the list. Don't send me no more questionnaires. I'm going to war without being pushed," and I signed up with the Navy.

Now the Navy has some swell posters of guys with rippling muscles stuffing shells into guns, also of buglers in whites tootin' horns under canopies of code flags; but you hardly get your first shots before you discover that the rippling muscles are strictly the result of scrubbing decks and scraping passageways and other very unmusical ways of spending your time. Also, that long before you arrive at any place where a German or a Jap is liable to stick his head out from under a wave, your blues are gathering moths; tin hats, life jackets and dungarees are the uniform of the day, and whites are very inappropriate dress in which to conduct a field day.

Boy, did I grow up on that first cruise! I even had to start shaving three times a week. My hair curled, my face got rounder and I got a pair of hips to hang my pants on. When we hit New York again, I swing over the side with a bugle sewed onto my sleeve. A new bugler; a new horn. I am sent to get one. Which is how I met Dolores.

I draw the horn all right. I find it strictly ersatz—plastic, to you; green and dull and definitely from corn. It seems that all the brass is being shot at the enemy direct.

Anyhow, while I am on my way to the Bronx to show it to Pop, I develop a yen to run a few notes through its dingy mouthpiece. So I leave the subway at what happens to be Times Square, slide over to the curb, inflate my lungs and let go with the "Bugle Call Rag"—which ditty allows plenty of lattitude in the playing of a bugle.

Before I am well into the fifth bar, I am enveloped by a cop, an MP, an SP and some union runt who ducks in under the cop's arm. The cop claims I am creating a public disturbance and soliciting without a license; the SP insists on smelling my breath; the union guy tells me my card has expired, and the MP sticks his nose in anyway, just to show the Army is on the job —even if they can't play poker.

But it's Dolores who says, "You sure draw night sticks like flies, sailor," and I forget all about law and authority, just from looking at her.

I stowed the horn all right, like the cop told me; but he couldn't stop me from staring at a dream that is as smooth as any Guy Lombardo arrangement. "Yeah!" I muttered, "Don't I?" But it was my subconscious talking, strictly sub-conscious, for my conscious is anchored to a Symphony in Black; big brown eyes and come-and-get-me mouth and silken black hair and black hat with feathers and black dress with spangles—and especially what was in it. Wow! Gershwin and Duke Ellington blended into one sweet song. My breath keeps sucking in, like I was going to play the Hallelujah Chorus in one burst. No one like that had ever happened to me before.

"Relax, sailor, relax—before you blow up," she told me.

That makes me normal enough to grin and exhale. "Going my way?" I ask her.

"Why, yes," she agreed. "Sure!" and she hooked her arm through mine. "Where to, big boy?"

MY EYEBROWS went clear up under my hat at that, because I hadn't the faintest idea. But quick as a hot lick I thought about Bozo Schwartz telling us one night on the fantail, "Feed 'em kid. Feed 'em. They're always hungry." I grabbed her tighter and looked around for a chain restaurant, which was dead abeam anyway. "Here!" I sung out and started out with a lunge that almost yanked her clear off her peg heels.

When I found out how nervous I was, I slowed down. But I didn't have enough sense to read danger in the look she threw at me as we started through the revolving door. If I had, I'd have kept right on going, completed the circuit and let myself out in the street again. At that point I had it all wrong; I thought I'd caught her!

Anyhow, I stumbled after her. We parked at one of those three legged tables that are such a restaurant specialty. I stowed my hat and horn, took another good look and broke out damp all around my neck. Gee, she was pretty!

At this point I am cooled off by the waitress who shoves a score card at me. "Oh, yes," I says, passing the folder over to Dolores. "Eat?"

"No," she tells me quietly, turning her head a shade to one side and watering outa the corners of those lovely eyes. "I'll have a drink with you, though."

"Drink? Oh, sure, yes!" and I began to wonder how I'd ever stumbled into this mess. Outside of only having a couple of bucks, Ma wouldn't like me drinking, even if I was home from my first cruise. "Go ahead and order," I told her with a snap of the flipper. "We'll—we'll have two."

She did and we did. "My name's Dolores, Dolores Hutchins," she told me. "And you're a Navy bugler, aren't you?"

"Micky Flynn, late of Micky Flynn's Ramblers, at your service, m'am," I popped at her while the proper tone oozed back into my puss. "Strictly a fugitive from jive, that's me. Tootin' my way to victory with an ersatz horn."

"Boy, did I play! I been playing a horn since the days when my sister Gladys used to button up the black velvet suit that went under the surplice. Course I was an infant then. Strictly classical. You know, you gotta feel swing. Had to wait for my beard to grow. At thirteen though, I shaved, burned my velvet suit and took to jive. Had been running errands for a character who made a little book, so I bought myself a new horn with mother-of-pearl valves and a genuine gold-plated bell. Boy, it was a honey! Would still be blowing sweet and hot if I hadn't dropped it over the side of a Staten Island ferry. Say, why am I telling you all this? What's your racket?" and I drank my drink at one gulp, which was a mistake because my scalp started peeling forward from the back of my neck.

"I've been dancing for a long time, too," she told me and I noticed she had the sense to sip her poison. Must have had one before, I figured. "Back in Miller's Falls, when I was just plain Muriel Hutchins, I had a real ballet dress and slippers and—Say, big boy, where's your drink? You sure get rid of 'em fast. How about another?"

So I told her about doing odd jobs here and there, marking time till I could get away from school and about how Ma got sick writing excuses and Pa got sick of threatening and getting for me a work ticket and I took my turn behind the counter in Pa's music store. "Pa's department is strictly long hair," I explains, sipping my second drink. "Mine carried the boogie-woogie, jive—and the sales. Course I haven't anything against long hair music. A good trumpeter should blow his soul out through that old horn no matter whose name's at the top of the score. Only the arteries in my feet ain't hardened enough yet, that's all. But, gee, you're beautiful—only your eyelashes are too long." The second drink was working already.

"Yes," she agreed, "they are, aren't they?" and, while I watched, she pulled them off and stuffed them into her handbag. "You're beautiful too, Micky," she told me, "only your nose is too short. I don't usually go around talking to strange sailors, only us girls have to be nice to service men—specially the ones with ribbons—and welcome them back to little old New York."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Yeah. For the first time since I been in the Navy I wish Micky Flynn's Ramblers was rolling them in the aisles again, with you out front at the mike."

So we had another pair of drinks and I brought the horn down from the coat rack and wanted to play "Beer Barrel Polka"—which was a nifty back about then—for her; but she said, "I'll leave you if you do, sailor. And I'll be alone, too, because you'll be in the hoosegow or the brig or the latrine or something after the first three bars." And anyhow she had to dance to that little lash up three times every night, counting the dinner show"—which isn't much, but it amuses the kids and school teachers and

keeps the food from rotting in the ice box."

I asked "Where?" and she said, "The Casino," on the very end of the line, stage right, and would I come to see her dance? Then I asked her, "Will anything keep me away?" and she got up and told me she had to blow.

I tried to get onto my pins, but I bounced back into the chair twice and the waitress brought me black coffee and the check and I stumbled over to the nearest USO and slept it off.

At midnight, when I woke up, I should have forgotten all about her and taken the subway home to Pa and showed him the horn, like I promised; but her great big beautiful eyes kept getting in the way. I started parading Broadway, mournful and broke, wondering how I could crash her act.

That's when I collide with Red Jaines, who comes out of a subway entrance, feeling his way in the dark. I never did like that guy, ever since he poured molasses into my trumpet. But he looked prosperous and on the make, so I figured he might be persuaded to play angel just this once.

I grabbed him by the arm and yelled, "Hello, Red! Where you going?" and he stops and peers at me and blinks and then comes across with, "Well, if it ain't the Hallelujah trumpeter, all dressed up in a sailor suit!"

And I tell him it's me all right and I drop his arm, but not my idea. "What's on the fire?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he yawns. "I just made so much overtime, I thought I'd do a little wolfing. You pick it up plenty fast on the night shift—especially if you can arrange to get paid for sleeping."

"Sleeping?" I repeats. "How do you arrange that?"

"Oh, we have a tip off system that keeps the super guessing. Every time he leaves his office, the boys bat out the warning with their hammers."

"Gee!" I says, to humor him. "Beats scrubbing decks, don't it?"

"Sure does, chump. What's new?"

I smiles and rubs my hands. "I know where there's the most gorgeous brunette—"

"Where?" he wants to know, suddenly coming awake.

"At the Casino," I explains, still thinking happily of the overtime.

"Not me," he says with a snort. "The Casino, my foot! No class. Give me a nice quiet saloon, any time."

"All right," I agrees, "but lend me ten bucks so I can go take a look."

"Not a chance. I always travel with my dough," he tells me. "Where is this joint?"

When we comes alongside the entrance, Red stops and puts it to me, "What kinda shakedown is this?"

"No shakedown at all," I tells him. "I am blowing my horn, very peaceful, at the curb when several strangers with badges descend on me. When they leave me, I fall right into the arms of the most beautiful babe that ever had her lungs fouled up with Broadway cinders. We have a few drinks and I find a USO and sleep it off."

"Oh," says Red yawning. "Oh. See you later, kid. She won't even know you. Probably don't even work in the joint."

RIGHT then I am very saddened and about to turn away when I see a picture of Dolores and a bevy of very impressive sisters, all in G strings, reaching out their arms at us. "There she is!" I show Red. "Now, what about it?"

So Red says "Gee!" and pulls out a roll of bills as big as a Turk's head. "Kid, you was a sucker to go into the Navy," he goes on. "If you'd got a job in a shipyard you could have beat the rap. Look at me. While you're workin' for peanuts and gettin' all shot up doin' it, I'm getting lousy with greenbacks. Let's go in and see this toots of yours. I'll show you how it feels to have dough."

He has ordered a table ringside and I have slid into the seat before I asks him, "What did Old Man Sewell and his draft board have to say?"

"Aw, he tried to get tough and ended up with, 'Just let me catch you out of a job, young fellow, and you'll be in the Army so fast you won't have time to change your pants'—but he had to reclassify me."

While I'm wondering who's the sucker, the floods go on, the MC grabs the mike and the show is on.

Did those gals swing it and tramp on

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down! Dolores spotted me too, and she waved and threw me the wink.

"Come on, kid, come on!" Red yells at me. "You sure got the green light."

Before the last number was over, we was at the stage door. Dolores and her sisters came bursting out all in a lump. I grabbed Dolores and Red grabbed a sister and we all went to supper on Red's bankroll.

From then on, I wished the ship would never sail. I dated her all I could. I was nuts about her and I told her so. Of course, I didn't come right out with, "I love you, Dolores;" but I did say, "Gee, I'm nuts about you, Babe. Will you wait for me until after the war and Micky Flynn's Ramblers are jivving again. I'll build you a feature spot all your own, singing and dancing in front of a name band."

"You bet I will, Micky. You're very sweet," and she leaned over and gave me the softest and longest kiss that ever happened off the screen.

Well, hell, even a bulger has to forget his art sometime. I raked her into my arms and, boy, did I ruin her makeup!

She was miffed about it too, said I ought to have better sense. "Sense?" I asked her. "Right now I don't need it. I got you. Just wait till after the war. Then I'll have a question to ask you—band and all. Will you wait for me?"

She had her breath by then and she leaned over to me and whispered, "Yes, Micky Darling, I'll wait for you."

WHEN we shoved off this time we went for quite a trek. It seems the Navy doesn't give a damn how far from home they send their cruisers. We wallowed and pounded and fought in places that should have stayed just names in a history book, and in other places with no name but their lattitude and longitude.

At first I was kinda sick. Then I got well from the pounding only to catch the worst disease of all, lovesickness. No mail came over the side 'cause not many ships could catch us. The planes didn't seem to be flying our way, either. Despite all this, I begin writing Dolores letters. The more I wrote, the worse I felt.

"Well, finally we put into a port and I got letters from Pa and a squashed cake

from Ma, and, from Gladys, a picture of some mug in an army uniform with a note telling me to "look him up" if I came across him. But from Dolores, not even a V-mail.

At the next stop, half the mail sack was mine. She told me how sorry she was and how she hadn't had any letters before the one with the dough in it and maybe the others had been torpedoed. And I was the sweetest sailor in the world to be thinking of a poor little chorus girl and she loved me for it.

Well, I grabbed my horn and danced back onto the fantail and blew all afternoon at the ship's wake and was put on report for not showing up in time to sound Mess Gear.

But I didn't mind that extra duty. While I was wringing out the swab, I decided there was no sense waiting. I sat right down and wrote her this:

"Darling Dolores, My Darling,

"You made me so happy I had to do five hours extra duty. But I don't mind. I don't mind anything if you love me. I was going to wait till I got back before I asked you a question. But why wait when I love you?

"So take this twenty-five dollars and buy yourself an engagement present. I'm sorry I haven't any more, My Dear Darling, but I sent the rest to Mom. Just tell me you love me and you'll be mine and not even the censor will care.

"Your Affectionate Future Husband,

"Micky.

"P. S. I love you."

Well, the letters came regular after that. Gee, I was happy! They slapped me on report for baying the moon with a bugle; but she said she'd wait for me. What did I care for extra duty?

I sent her Mom's address and told her Pa could help with the dancing because he used to be a hoofer himself. And I told Ma the most wonderful girl in the world was coming to see her. "I been sending her my extra dough," I wrote Ma. "I have no use for it where I am. It's wonderful to know it's being looked after for when I come back and we're married."

Dolores wrote that the money orders

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were being rung up regularly and that she still loved me but that she was rehearsing a new show and would I forgive her because she didn't have time to go nowhere? Would I forgive her! There wasn't anything I wouldn't have forgiven that dame.

At last the break I'd been hoping for came. I was transferred back to New York for "new construction," which means you go to a shipyard and go crazy trying to make a half-finished hull into a fighting ship. I thought to myself, "Boy, this is it! We can get hitched. I'll make an allotment and Dolores can take off the G string and settle down and raise a family.

As soon as I hit the big town, I had to report to the ship. She sure was a mess; electric cables and slabs of bulkhead tangled up with workmen's lunch boxes and toilet seats. All day I looked for my division officer, just to be told to get into training for scrubbing plenty of paint work.

Well, in the late afternoon I finally got secured and started down the gangway with an all-night liberty pass stuffed in my jumper pocket. I told them I wanted to see my folks, so I thought I ought to follow through on the project first, before I picked up Dolores after the show.

On the gangway, coming onto the night shift, who do I run afoul of but Red Jaines, complete with welder's helmet and gloves. "Hello two-ply sucker," is his cheery greeting. "So you're not wise to yourself yet, eh? Still in the bell-bottom pants, I see."

I slips him a sickly grin and slides by, boarding a train for the Bronx. That night I got to admit I wasn't a good tonic for my family. I was on the hot seat and they knew it. I knew it too and I wanted to get out of there—which I finally did.

By the time I came alongside the stage door, the joint was dark. I asked the caretaker and he said, "Oh, the Hutchins kid. She usually goes to Molly McGuire's for supper after the show. Relative of hers?"

"Nope, just a friend," I throw over my shoulder as I am on my way.

IT DIDN'T take long to [illegible] or to see Red's carcass parked alongside of her. My showing up must have been a slight surprise because she stared at me and gulped like she'd swallowed a peach

pit. "Hello, darling," I calls out and snatches off my cap and goes to kiss her.

At this point Red gets up, bars the way, and growls, "Scram, sailor boy. This is big time. Back to the waterfront."

I stops and looks at Dolores and then at Red and I lower my head and prepare to go through, when Dolores bursts out with, "Oh, don't, please! Come over here, Micky, and sit down. Red, you let him alone."

I sat down and she patted my arm and asked me how I was and if it was wet on the ocean and a lot of other guff till I got used to the idea that I was a cold herring with her. "Aren't you even going to kiss me?" I asks, very sour. "Do I get the brushoff without even a final wrestling match?" and I began to think of ax murders and nice, quiet stranglings and other polite ways of doing for dames.

"Lay off, kid, lay off," Red warns me. "This is strictly my dish, see? If you hadn't been splashing around in your little bath tub, playing sailor, you'd know what the score was. Everyone else does."

"Be decent, will you, Red?" she snaps at him.

"O.K.—O.K., I'll be decent," he comes back. "What d'you want me to do, kiss him for you?"

All this time I am slowly and painfully wising up to the situation. I am now aware of the fact that I have been sold a bill of goods. "That's a smart looking dress you've got around your middle," I tells her. "Only, with the next sucker's dough you might buy more cloth and get the rest of you covered, too."

At that she yanks open her handbag and holds up a roll of bills. "Here's part of your old money," she blurts out, and I notice the water is starting to streak her mascara. Guess she was mad.

Red snatches the roll away from her. "Wait a minute, Baby," he tells her. "I gave you that dough to play the horses with this Saturday. Remember?"

"Yes, but I owe him plenty," she admits. "Give it to him, Red."

"All right, cookie," he agrees. "If you owe it to him, I'll give it to him," and he drops the bills into a seidel half full of beer. "Dive for it, sailor, dive. And when you get it, scram outa here and don't come back

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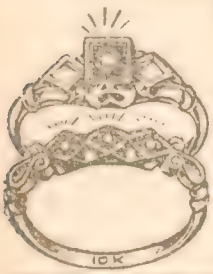

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or I'll cram that horn of yours right through your tonsils."

Oh, I fished the dough out all right. A hundred bucks is as good to me as to anyone else. And I didn't throw the beer in his face either. But the wheels in the old dome begin turning over as I leave the two of them there giving me the horse laugh. A ship is a ship, I thought, and a horn is a horn; but what about draft boards?

So the next night I took an express to the Bronx and called on my old friend Charlie Sewell who lives in a third floor rear with a wife and a swarm of kids. After he has told me he is glad to see me, I ask him, "How is the current crop of 1As?"

"Getting thinner and thinner," he tells me. "Hard to find bona fide candidates any more. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing, Charlie, nothing," I insists, casual. "I was just thinking the armed services ought to help you do a little recruiting, that's all. Keep your eyes open, Charlie. I might be able to steer something your way."

"Okay, kid. Still like the Navy?"

"I wish I was in the Navy for keeps," I tell him with a growl. "Away out in the middle of the ocean where there ain't no dames."

MAKING a friend of McGonigle, the night super, is no problem at all. He is thin-haired and harried and he chews cigar ends and rushes from 'phone to scuppers, from engine room to crow's nest.

"Mr. McGonigle," I tells him, "You're wasting valuable time. A wise guy like you, rushin' around like the pied piper. You owe it to yourself to slow down."

"Yeah, and I also owe it to my grandchildren," he grunts. "But we got a commissioning date to make and we ain't hittin' on all six."

"And to what do you attribute your failure?" I asks him in my best Grand Concourse English.

"Oh, hell, lots of things, sailor. Priorities and headaches and lack of equipment."

"And men sleepin' on the job?" I helps him.

He looks at me kinda queer. "What do you know about that?" he wants to know. "And anyway, damn it, I can't catch 'em."

"That's where I come in," I tells him. "I'm a public-spirited sailor and I want to

see this war done up in a package and delivered to the boneyard. I'm also a bugler."

"You don't say," he says, cooling off. "What's that to me?"

"Do you know reveille when you hear it?" I ask him.

"Hell! Do I! Wasn't that the unhappiest part of the last war for me?"

"All right. You're on," I tell him with a pat on the back.

Saturday dawns clear and bright, a beautiful day. "Track fast," says the afternoon "bulldog." I got off early and went home and hung around the shop, showing people my ersatz bugle and being sorry there weren't any new trumpets to sell and spinning platters on the store phonograph, but mostly just waiting. Tuned the radio in on Belmont for a spell; but the bugler wasn't even up to wartime snuff. Sounded like he was using a cornet, too.

Mom wanted me to stay for the night; but I told her I had to get back to the ship —meaning receiving ship—so we played rummy for a while and I picked up my horn and told the family, "So long," and they said, "Where are you going?" and I said, "Recruiting," and checked out.

The ship was pretty quiet that night. The usual flood lights made yellow pools all over the decks, but the chippers had knocked off for the week-end and the riggers were smashing furniture in one of the local pubs. A fine night for sleep! Not too hot, and yet you didn't have to hug the engine room.

I stuck my head into McGonigle's office and called out, "All set?" and he came back with, "Hell, yes, lad. Go to it, and good luck."

So I hugged my horn under my arm and started prowling. There were a few electricians poking at wires and a plumber wrestling with a pipe. Outside of that, and one welder sputtering blue flame near the fantail, I didn't see anybody else alive.

I began to wonder if Red was aboard. Maybe he'd taken the night off. But the chances were he'd be back here tonight, specially if the bookies had cleaned him in the afternoon.

I started following welding cables; but I soon gave that up. There didn't appear to be any future in it. There was steam on in the engine room, with a couple of guys turning handles and peering at dials. But

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still no Red. I bet I wandered over that ship for two hours; into the turrets, down into the barbettes—even into the ice boxes and the laundry tubs.

Just when I was scared McGonigle would run out on me for another bucket of suds, I thought of the chain locker. I started down from the top of the house and got as far as the admiral's quarters when I heard a faint wheeze, like steam escaping from a leaky gasket, and there was Red, stretched out on the admiral's chart table, dead to the world. He looked so darn comfortable I thought of trying the bugle on his tonsils, just for size.

As I soon discovered from looking around, this was a very fortunate place for him to sleep, because everything was finished inside, including a lock with a door on it. So I tiptoed to the lock, closed the door, turned the key, unlimbered my bugle, licked my lips and let go with the loudest reveille I've ever attempted before or since.

Before I am half through, there is a terrific thundering and banging against that door, compared with which a salvo from six-inch rifles is as a puffing of pop guns. But the door holds long enough to allow McGonigle to arrive, puffing and on the run, his pencil and notebook already itching to be used.

And when that door was opened, did Red and his five little playmates begin to sing! If it hadn't been for McGonigle, I'll bet Red would have tried to use my horn on my tonsils.

I HAVEN'T heard from Red since he got his letter from Charlie Sewell. But, wonders of wonders, I did hear from Dolores the other day. She says she's still doing all right for herself, what with service men coming and going in little old New York, and it's a shame that a man with Red's talent can't get better than a private's job and she wishes I'd write to her and come and see her when the ship gets back because she's sure I ought to have more stripes by now.

At least, I think that's what she said. I can't remember too well because I didn't keep the letter too long, and the Pacific is a large lake to go around searching for torn pieces of paper.

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

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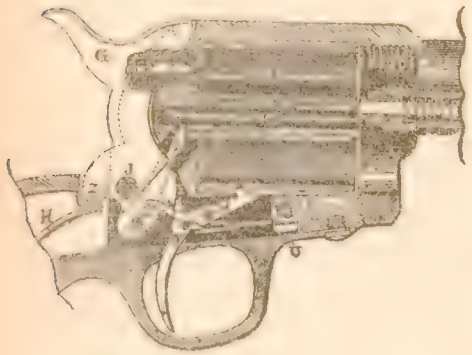

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J —Hammer screw
I —Hammer roll
L—Hand
M—Bolt
N—Trigger
H—Main spring
U—Sear and bolt spring and screw
C—Cylinder
D—Center pin and bushing

IN THE last issue of SHORT STORIES we were yapping about the Single Action Army revolver—a mighty fine gun manufactured by the Colt boys up in Hartford, Conn.

It is an excellent gun to use for target work when properly tuned up, and I might add that about the only thing wrong with these guns as they come from the factory is the main spring is a little stiff and the trigger pull a bit heavy—these points were discussed last issue.

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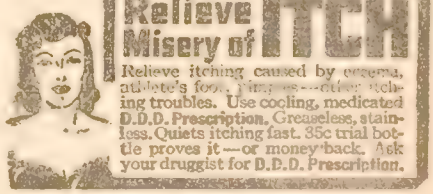
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It might be a good idea to emphasize one point—the first operation in reducing the trigger pull is to carefully polish the contact surfaces of the sear point and the hammer notch where they come together. In the action of the Colt hogsleg as it comes from the factory the forward edge of the sear engages the forward edge of the hammer notch, leaving a space between the two parts at this point which, viewed from the side, looks like an equilateral triangle. These angles should not be changed, although wear will flatten the forward edge of the sear a bit, which is O.K.

The bolt is the gadget (M on sketch) which locks the cylinder so the cartridge in the chamber is lined up with the bore of the barrel. It's a touchy little cuss and it is a precision job to install a new one. It is important that the bolt-nub fits snugly in the frame cut as well as in the cylinder cut.

I had a very discouraging experience with the first one I installed (many years ago). After having worked like a beaver getting a good snug fit at the frame and cylinder cut, I took the gun to the range and tried it out on the target—everything was hunky dory when jacketed bullets were used—but with lead slugs the bore soon leaded and finally a lot of lead sprayed out between the cylinder and the barrel. Yep, I figured the darned cylinder didn't line up.

Not knowing what to do, I ordered a new bolt and while waiting for its arrival from the factory I turned down a steel rod to fit the bore of the barrel. With this rod in the bore and the hammer at half cock I could turn the cylinder quite a bit. Me still figuring the durn thing didn't line—which just goes to show how dumb I was (or am).

The new bolt finally arrived—but I hadn't been able to figure out how to line up the cylinder so that the chambers would line up exactly with the bore of the barrel—so I made a collar to fit in the chamber of the cylinder and in which the above mentioned rod was a snug fit. This was a lot of work and necessitated a lot of measuring and machine work—but at last I saw the light.

The groove of the bore measured a scant .424 inches while the bore of the chambers at the small end measured .430+.

The jacketed bullets measured .425 and the lead bullets miked .4295+. It's almost certain leading will show up when a .4295+

lead slug is forced by a charge of powder, through a .424 barrel. I made up a die to size the lead bullets to .426—and my leading problem was solved—although the cylinder perhaps didn't quite line up with the barrel.

To get back to fitting the bolt—after it fits the frame and cylinder cuts, smoke the top of the bolt-nub to see where it engages the cylinder when it throws under spring tension as the hammer is operated. The chances are that the rear top of the bolt-nub will engage first and perhaps it will hit the cylinder outside of the cylinder cut bevels (this is a common trouble and you will notice that the bluing is generally worn off in a circle around the cylinder of most guns).

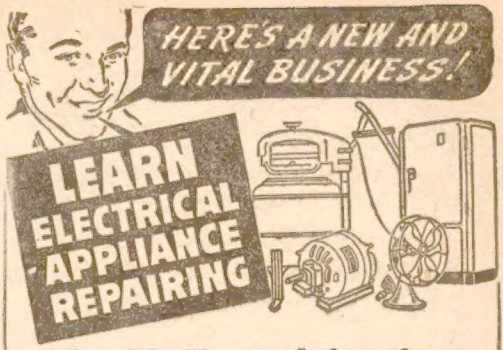
To remedy this condition the top of the nub should be taken off at its rearward end and rounded from front to rear, then polished with emery cloth keeping the surface flat but at the original angle.

Examine the bolt-nub to see if it is fouling the frame at the front or rear as it throws. This happens occasionally, especially at the rearward end, and should be taken down with a small file at the point which touches the frame.

To make the bolt throw earlier, the ends of the two prongs are filed—and remember if too much is taken off here, there is nothing to do but get a new bolt—so go easy. The bolt should throw at such time so the nub will strike the bevel of the cylinder cut, and should engage the cylinder notch at exactly the same time that the sear engages the hammer full cock notch.

The bolt and sear spring, if it breaks at all, will generally do so at the fork on the bolt spring side. Insurance can be taken here by thinning and tapering slightly away from the fork with the deeper cut at the end, making them more flexible thus taking the strain off at the fork.

The hand (L in sketch) is the arm that turns the cylinder as the hammer is cocked and is generally cut properly when you get a new one from the factory. Watch the two lifting surfaces as they engage the ratchet of the cylinder, also the position of the hammer at full cock. When properly fitted the hammer should move a very small distance to the rear after the bolt locks the cylinder.



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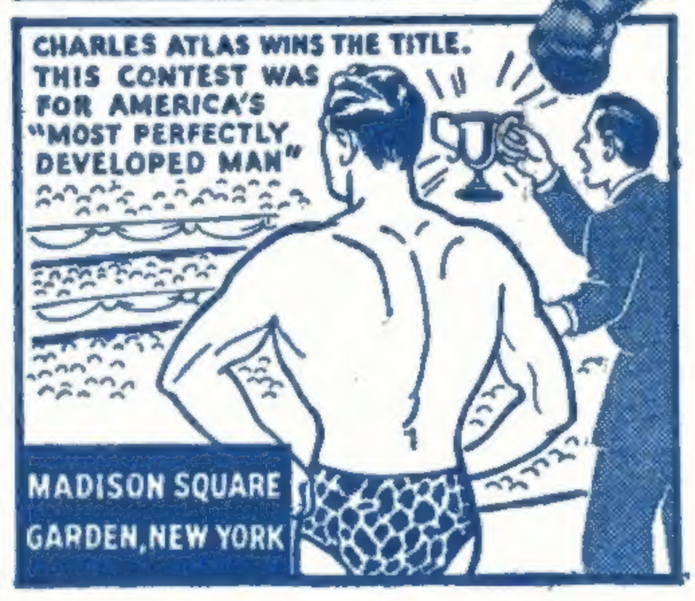
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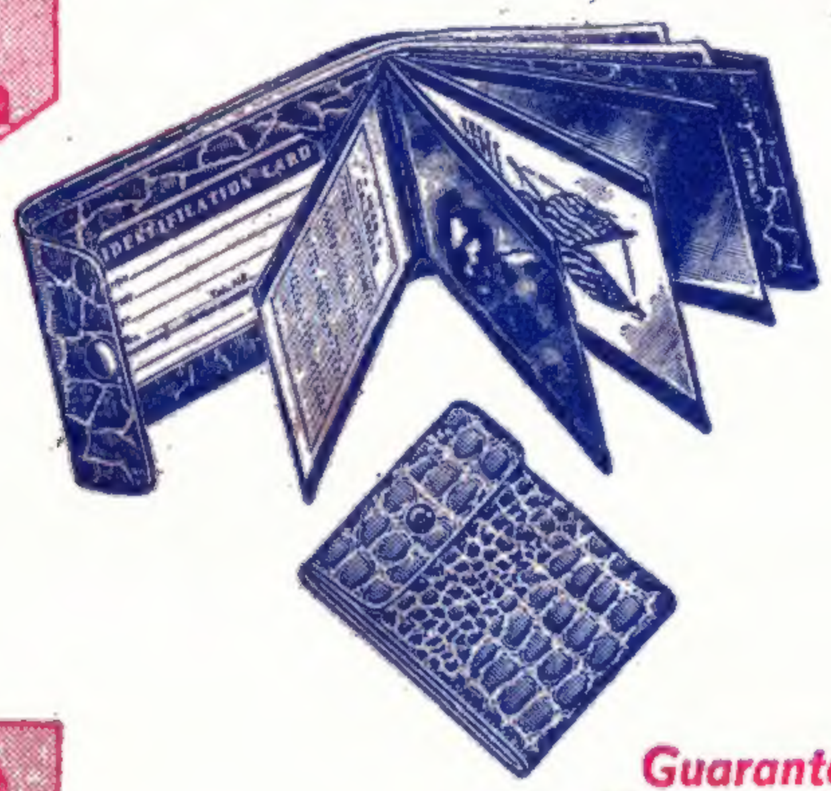

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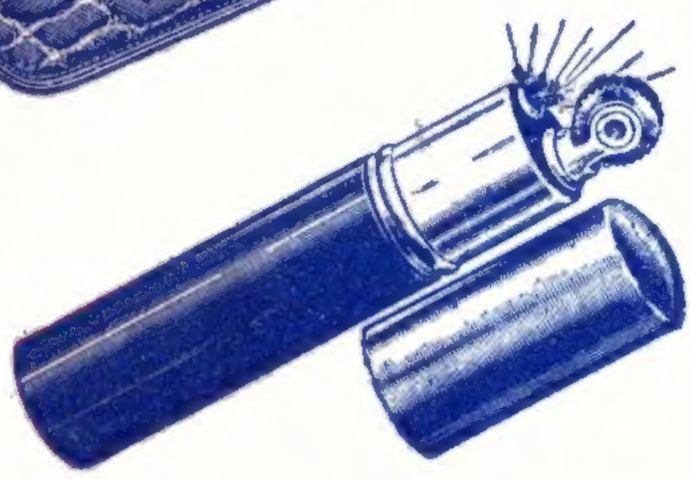

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